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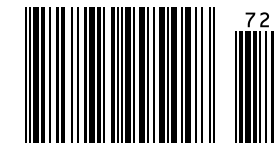
ALL-STORY

GUEST DESIGNER **MARILYN MINTER**

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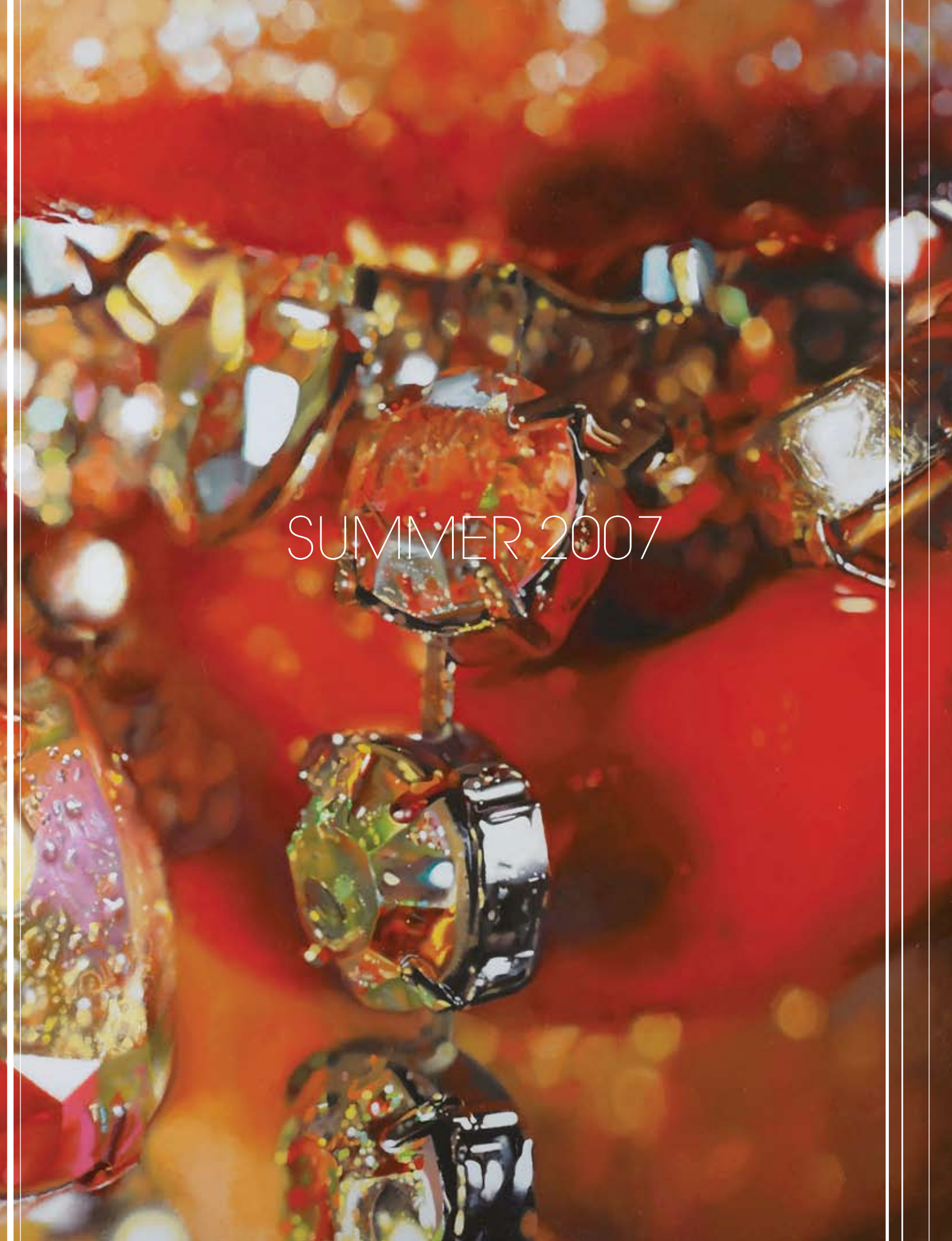
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SUMMER 2007 VOL.11 NO.2

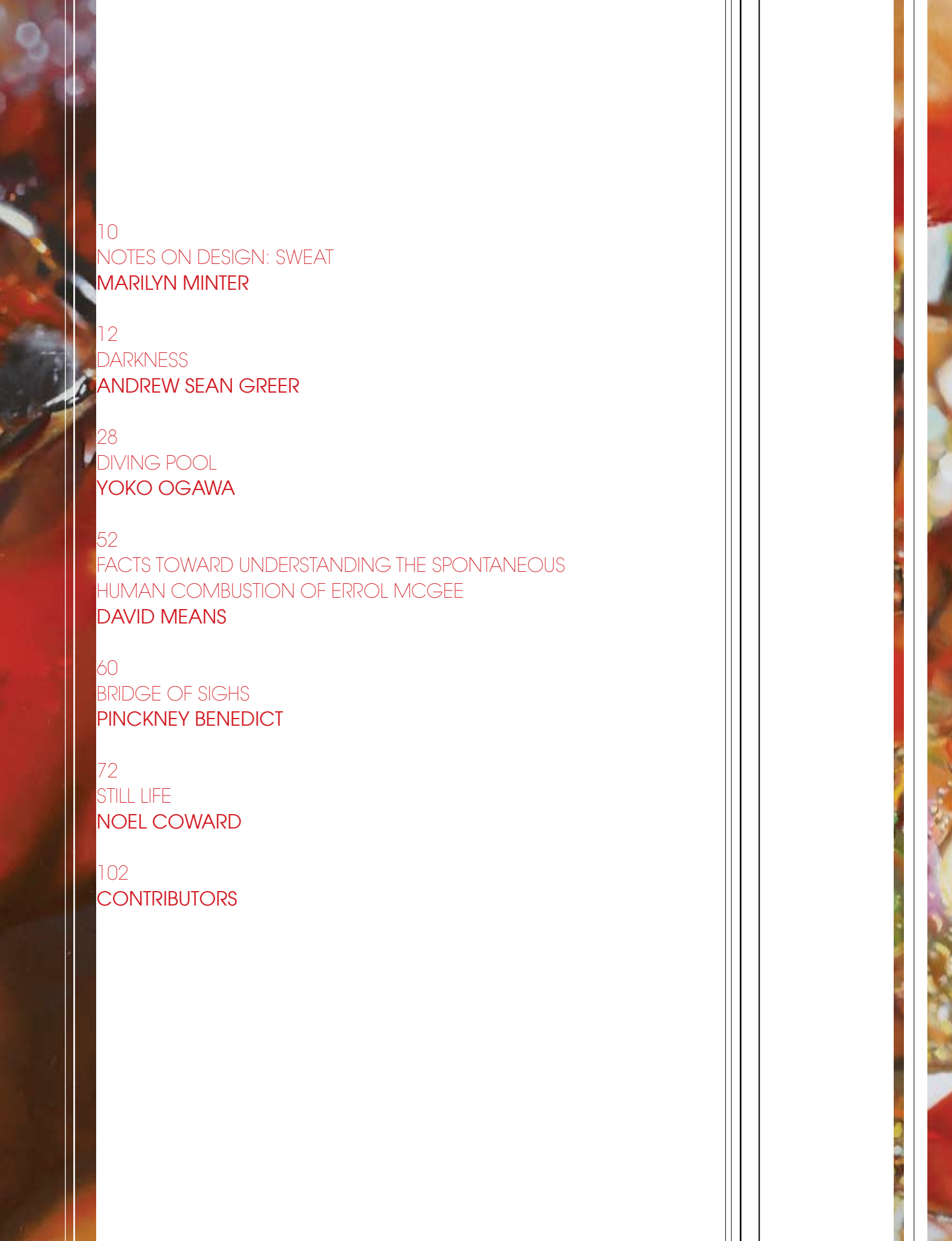


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ZOETROPE [Fr. Gk. *zōō*, life + *tropos*, turning, changing]: an optical toy that converts a series of pictures of successive attitudes into the semblance of continuous motion: wheel of life: life revolution



SWEAT

I've always been a sweater. Raised in Louisiana and Florida, two states renowned for their heat and humidity, I was still warmer and wetter as a child than everyone around me. I was on a volleyball team and usually soaking wet with sweat, hair plastered to my forehead, salt stinging my eyes, even in the most air-conditioned gyms. At parties, by the third dance, my hair would start wilting, my armpits forming moist circles in my dresses.

I went to graduate school in New York to escape the Southern heat as much as the culture. The snow and frigid weather were a welcome shock—my own sort of heaven. Of

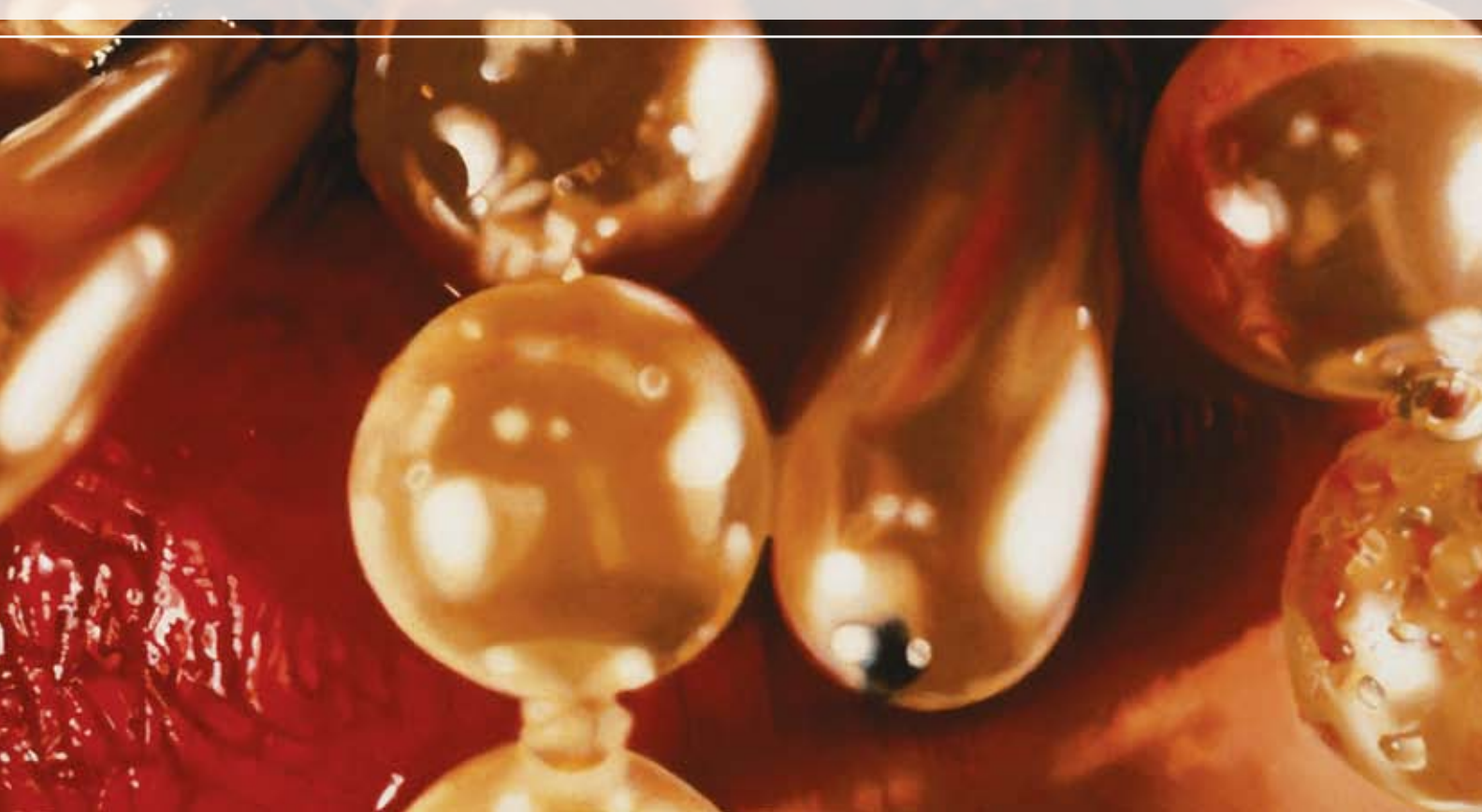
course, I am cold in the dead of winter; but in fall and spring I can get around town with just a hoodie or the skimpiest of coats. People always tell me that I'm underdressed when I'm perfectly comfortable. I won't go outside if the temperature is higher than ninety degrees; I feel like I can't operate in those temperatures, so I don't. What does all this have to do with the art I make?

Everything looks better to me when wet—preferably dripping wet: SLOWLY DRIPPING WET. That condition is awkward, uncomfortable, and uncontrollable, which I like. When I'm shooting photos, my subjects start bone dry, and



MARILYN MINTER

immediately my hands are just itching to get a spray bottle. I love to shoot and paint running drips of sweat—the more the better. My favorite drips are those that get heavier and heavier as they descend an arm or a cheek; I capture them as they are about to splash off my subjects, unable to hold any longer. So when invited to design the Summer issue of *Zoetrope: All-Story*, I decided to mark that steamiest of seasons by presenting photographs and paintings of sweat, which you can view while sweating in your own part of the world, as I will in mine.





DARKNESS

ANDREW SEAN GREER



WHAT WERE THEY LIKE THE FIRST DAY?

The way we all were.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST THING THEY DID?

What we all did: opened the window. Helen opened it, the bedroom window: the lace curtain fluttered out into the cold air like a waving handkerchief, and they saw.

WHAT DID THEY THINK IT WAS?

A mistake of their clock; a power outage in the night; the work of Louise's diabolical sleeping pills (which felled her nightly like an ax to a tree, making her into a sleepwalking clock-changer); a cloud. They spent half an hour trying to figure out if they had lost their minds; they were old women, so it was not impossible; each of them had lost things before, had spent a secret hour in a hotel room searching for keys, only to discover them right in her pocket. But very soon the radio told them they had not gone insane. The sky had.

"How could particles in the air do this?" Louise wanted to know. She sat on the sofa, perhaps too frightened to look outside again. Every light in the house was on, a parody of morning.

Helen sat bravely by the window. "They say it happened after Krakatoa, all those years ago," she said. "The ash was so thick that for three whole days it was utter darkness."

"But nothing's happened. They don't say anything's happened."

"They said it isn't dangerous. The sun just isn't out."

"Are you going to school?"

"I don't think so. Were you going to work today?"

"I don't know."

Helen stared out at the gloom, shivering. All down the street the young people wandered beneath the still-unlit streetlights, some with flashlights or lanterns, laughing. No old people out on the street at all, not in this kind of confusion, not with the sidewalks as loud as a carnival and the crash of police lights everywhere. In the apartment across the street, Helen could make out a couple sitting down to a candlelit breakfast. And below, in front of the building, stood an old Russian woman and her son, hand in hand, nearly indistinguishable in fur hats, looking straight up at the sky.

It was nine o'clock in the morning and as dark as the inside of an eye.

"It's nothing, I'm sure of it," Helen said. "It isn't time to worry yet."

But she looked over at Louise on the sofa, her dear

Louise, her sweet white-haired girl, rubbing a spot out of the coffee table; and though it was not time to worry yet, she began to cry, because there was no helping it.

WHAT DID THEY DO THE SECOND DAY?

Called friends. They could not be alone—Helen said it felt like her grandmother's house in the war, with blackout curtains and the roar of military planes along the California coast and the threat of something happening—and so they invited friends over for lunch and made what they could from the pantry; for some nameless reason they did not dare go outside, though the city had put the streetlights on and the throngs of young people had lessened with the dimming novelty of it all. Louise made pasta by dropping eggs into the crater of a flour volcano. She did this in silence, flour puffing into the air as if she had burst the seeds of a milkweed. Helen thawed and roasted a chicken. Then, her hostess's instinct intact, she thawed and roasted another.

At noon, she heard a rattle from the living room, which was Louise drawing the curtains. She understood; they were not Aleuts; they could not bear constant night. Then she heard—like an exhalation of relief—the sound of a match. Candles.

Only two people came: an elderly colleague of Helen's at the college and a kindly, nervous painter Louise had met at an artists' colony. They were good, intelligent talkers at a party; neither was suitable that day. They had clearly come out of loneliness. Helen and Louise found themselves smiling and dutifully filling wineglasses and listening for a doorbell that never rang. What was meant as an afternoon of solace had become one of duty.

"I hear they are turning to rations," said the colleague, a professor of Victorian realism with a waxed gray mustache.

Louise wanted to know what kinds of rations.

"Gas," he said. "And fresh food and meat. Like in the war." He meant World War II. "Who knows? Maybe nylons, Helen."

Helen would not have it; "Ridiculous," she said, regretting the company of this pompous man. The curtains blew open to reveal the unearthly blackness, like the Roman servants who marched beside victorious generals and periodically reminded them of death.

Louise said she could not remember the war.

The painter spoke up, and what she said chilled them: "I think they've done something."

Helen quickly said, "Who? Done what?" Louise gave her



a look.

The painter winced at her own thoughts, and her jewelry clanked on her wrists. “They’ve done something and they haven’t told us.”

The old man salted his chicken. The optimistic second chicken still sat in the kitchen, glistening and uncarved. “You mean a bomb?”

“An experiment or a bomb or I don’t know. I’m sure I’m wrong, I’m sure—”

“An experiment?” Louise said.

Just then, they heard a roar. Instinctively, they went to the window, where in her haste to open it, Helen knocked a little

terra-cotta pot over the sill and into the afternoon air, which was as red-dark as ever, but they could not hear its little crash above the din: the streetlights had gone out and now the city was alive with cries.

WHY DID THE STREETLIGHTS GO OUT?

It’s unclear. Perhaps a strain on the system; perhaps a wrong switch thrown at the station. But it was a fright to people. That was when the blackouts began, the rolling blackouts, meant to conserve electricity. Two hours a day—on Louise and Helen’s block it was at noontime, though it made little difference—with no lamps, no clocks, just flashlights and can-





dles melting to nubs. It was terrifying the first few days, but then it was something you got used to. You knew not to open the refrigerator and waste the cold; you knew not to open the window and waste the heat. “Temporarily,” the mayor said. “Until we can determine the duration.” Of the darkness, he meant, of the sunless sky.

When he said this over the radio, Helen glanced at Louise and was startled. As a child, she had noticed how sometimes, in old-fashioned books, full-color illustrations of the action would appear—through some constraint at the bindery—dozens of pages before the moments they were meant to depict. Not déjà vu, not something already seen, but something

not-yet-seen, and that was what was before her: a woman in profile, immobile, her hair modern and glacially white-blue, her face old-fashioned as a Puritan’s in its fury; her eyes blazing briefly with the demonic retinas of a snapshot; her hand clutching the arm of the chair in a fist; her lips open to speak to someone not in the room. A picture out of sequence.

“Louise?” she said.

Then it was gone. Her girl turned to her and blinked, saying, “What on earth does he mean by ‘duration’?”

WHY DID THEIR GOOD FRIENDS NEVER COME?

They were afraid. They were all waiting for someone to come





to them. They sat alone in the darkness, reading by candlelight, panicked as pigeons, waiting for someone to come, and yet they would not stir an inch. Young people will never understand this.

WHEN DID THEY DECIDE TO LEAVE?

After the riots, about two weeks later. Louise and Helen were out to dinner that night, Midtown, only the second time they had gone out to eat since the first day of the darkness, and they were still unsure if they were right to do so—if it was frivolous to be seen in a room with chandeliers and mirrors and poor people fussing over wealthier people. Louise felt everyone should be in mourning.

“The mirrors should be covered,” she said to their dinner companions, who were Louise’s agent, her husband, and their friend Peter. “Our garments should be rent. Don’t you think? Shouldn’t there be wailing somewhere?”

“If you covered the mirrors we’d have nothing,” Peter said. He was an antique sort of comic type still seen only in old movies: the amusing bachelor. Despite his fastidiousness and absolutely secret private life, he seemed convincingly heterosexual; and despite the gray in his conical Victorian beard, and the lines now permanently tooled across his forehead, he appeared all the more boyish, as an adolescent actor appears all the more innocent costumed as an old man.

The agent shook her head. Light gleamed off her glasses. Light gleamed everywhere: off cutlery and plates and crystal, sequins and earrings and pearls; it was indescribably beautiful. Perhaps like the aviary of some rare bird, the last of its kind.

“We have a blind friend,” the husband said. He was a scientist, a physicist working with lasers.

Helen found herself laughing. “Oh I hadn’t thought about the blind! Aren’t they lucky?” She absently drank from Louise’s wineglass and Louise gave her a look.

The husband went on seriously; he was a very serious, very emotional man. “She says she can’t help it but it’s satisfying. She says she hates herself for feeling it, but it amuses her that the rest of us think the world is going to end. Because it’s the same world for her.”

“It can’t be,” Louise said. “She can tell there’s no sun, and the plants—”

“For her, it’s the same world.”

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“That’s stupid,” Louise said. “I’m sorry, Frank. But it is.”

Her agent put her hand on Louise’s wrist. “Louise, don’t be a bore.”

Louise turned to her lover. “Helen?”

A moment later there was glass all around them in great shards and a hundred, much more than a hundred young men running down the street, and . . . it seemed like torches, and lanterns, and certainly things were already set on fire in the street before the awestruck diners had the sense to stand up and run to the back of the restaurant. It happened all at once and yet took an extraordinarily long time; there was no way to remember it right. All Louise knew was that, when she awoke from the scurry of action, she found herself against the wall with Helen and all of them, her napkin in one hand and her fork in the other. Like the net and triton of Neptune, she would later say to others. *I am a useless woman*, she told herself.

They spent the night at her agent’s place on an inflatable bed. Peter slept on the living room couch. Outside, they could hear the low moan of the rioting streets as if a monster were being tamed. “It feels like intergalactic warfare,” Helen whispered, kissing her lover.

“I’ve never felt so much like an old woman.”

“Enough. You’re five years younger than me.”

“Do you know the Byron poem?”

“Get some sleep. We’ll see how things are tomorrow. If they’ve suspended classes, we can drive out to Nathan’s.” This was Louise’s son.

“I had a dream,” Louise said quietly, “which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguish’d, and the stars . . .” Something. I can’t remember.”

“Hush now.”

“I had a dream, which was not all a dream . . .” Oh, what is it?”

“Hush.”

In the morning, things were no better, and so they left.

HOW DID THEY MEET, HELEN AND LOUISE?

They met twice before they fell in love. The first time was when they were very young, in their twenties, and they both taught at an all-girls school in Connecticut; they had the brief kind of passion trapped young women have, kisses in the back room of the library, then it was forgotten. The second time was many years later, when Louise was married to Harold Foster, the composer, and they saw each other at a fund-raiser for Helen’s college; Helen wore a black spangled pantsuit and stared at the woman in the pink dress who, although clearly in the midst of an argument with a tall, sour-looking man, smiled merrily; Helen stared at this woman as if called upon

to perform a feat of memorization, and at last Louise turned, startled, and met Helen's eyes for a breathless moment—it was almost, for Helen, as if she held something bright and fantastic in her palm, a thimble of mercury—until the president began to speak. When it was over, Helen discovered that her former colleague had been taken home by her husband because she had not been feeling well. Only the sour old man remained.

The third time was on the street in New York City and it was winter, the air as cold and tense as the skin of an apple; the leaves had already brightened and browned and fallen, so the trees that had shaded the avenues in summer were now invisible—and this is how Helen thought of herself as she walked down Second Avenue, the kind of woman who could not seem to hail a taxi, was always leaping out of the way of trucks, getting knocked aside by young people racing down the street; this is how she thought of herself: an invisible old thing in a brown plaid coat.

The light changed; a car leapt right for her, and she braced herself. And then there was Louise.

She did not see Helen at first. Louise was standing on the corner in a long white wool jacket, with embellished little buttons, holding a bouquet of out-of-season irises and trying to hail a cab. Short little Louise, her tiny hand dangling from that great coat sleeve, like a butler ringing a dinner bell in a too-loud room, so hopeless.

Helen said her name.

Louise did not hear her or, more likely, didn't consider that anyone on Second Avenue could be talking to her.

More loudly: "Louise. I found you."

She turned. Astounding how life is, how it will shift ever so slightly and reveal something in the fold of its garment that you hadn't noticed before, something there all along, how it will turn just like a person turns and show you a face you once had memorized amid the chatter of a tedious party, memorized as if for a test, and here it comes, years after you expected it: the test.

"Helen," she said. With no surprise at all. A pale, polished face with the craquelure of age, that haughty upturned nose, the brightly colored lips no longer full as a boarding-school teacher's, and all of her gone soft with a little fat, a trick photograph of the woman to whom Helen had made a promise so many years before. She would no longer have cared to meet that young woman, that foolish young woman who turned away from her in a snow-bright room, married an older man, and wore a pink dress to a formal party like a fool; Helen was too old to care about a woman like that. But of course that

woman no longer existed. Only this woman existed, Louise, here on the sidewalk with a bouquet of flowers and no surprise in her face at all: "Helen."

"Who are the flowers for?"

"For me." She laughed. "No good reason."

A month later she moved into Helen's apartment. They did not explain themselves to anyone; when friends asked, in private, how they had met and joined their lives so suddenly, each acted as if it were something that had been decided long before.

And in these memories, of course, they would always later place one more object in the scene. Ridiculous to have thought of then; almost like remembering that your lungs filled and emptied themselves of air each moment, or that your heart dutifully pumped its ration of blood. Glowing dimly in every memory: the sun.

WHEN THEY LEFT, WHAT DID THEY LEAVE BEHIND?

Helen left her knitting, her records, her running shoes, her files, her research, her plants (already dying), her stones and shells picked up for no reason on foreign beaches and kept, lovingly, purposelessly, and every glittering necklace and earring and bauble anyone had ever given her. She could easily have taken these things, but the mood was rush-rush, and she was the kind of woman who prided herself on efficiency, fortitude, decisiveness; so many small, easily taken things were left behind in the too-proud spirit of the refugee.

If you asked Louise, years later, what she had left, she could have only stared at you angrily and said: "My books."

And the neat shoeboxes untidily crammed with photographs. And the nubby, Ovaltine-colored couch that they had bought together before Louise had her teaching position and always meant to replace. And the jam in the fridge that a friend had made that summer: strawberry jam. And Louise's old wedding ring. And the art on the walls, made by friends in unfashionable artistic circles. And the mouse under the dishwasher. And the boy upstairs who had finally, loudly mastered "The Entertainer" on the piano. And the early morning shadow of the window falling across the bed, a neat cross with one broken pane, the first vision of every day, which they could have inked from memory on the coverlet. But of course shadows were already a thing of the past.

WHO DROVE?

Louise drove; it was her car, bought for a teaching stint at Yale that was accepted with fantasies of autumn drives dur-



ing which she would make long speeches to her enemies, her parents, to people from her past who hadn't loved her; but the drives had been crowded and rainy; the stint lasted only a year; and the money, in the end, just barely paid for the car itself. It was German and plum yellow and she loved it.

They left early in the morning, not that it would have made a difference. That same shade of dim red at all hours, like a flashlight held inside a mouth. Stepping out of their apartment house into the gloom: every time, it was like a deep-sea dive.

"Where are we going?" Helen said at the first wrong turn.

"I talked to Peter while you were in the shower. He's in a state. He's all alone."

"He's across town, Louise, it's going to take—"

"Hel, I said we'd take him. I'm sorry."

"Phone him now and say no. We can't. Phone him now and say no."

They both knew this was nonsense; cellular service had stopped nearly a week before. Besides, they did not even own a cell phone.

It was an hour of traffic and police barricades until they reached Peter's building; his street itself had been a horror show of streetlights blinking in and out of sleep, shadowy crowds of young men smoking outside early-open bars—nightmare creatures to the no-longer-young—and, in the shifting spotlights of the lamps, things that looked like baseballs rolling along the pavement, which were simply rats with no daylight to fear.

It was all too much for Louise. She sat there with her face bruised by the dashboard light and said she couldn't get out of the car; Helen had to do it.

Helen said, "You goddamned old woman. You brought me here and now I've—"

"Oh Helen."

And of course she did; of course Helen kissed her dear Louise on the cheek and slammed the door and went inside; but Helen planned to remember this, to save it in her catalog of hurt.

It was only five minutes before she came down with Peter, who had not finished his packing. He insisted on bringing books, twenty of them, because he said the three of them were basically anchorites locking themselves in a holy room, taking vows, sealing the entrance, and they needed their bibles; and that took longer than Helen would have hoped. Still, it was only five minutes, yet so much was different. They could





barely see Louise for all the broken glass.

WHAT HAD HAPPENED?

She wouldn't say. "Let's go!" she kept shouting, motioning them inside, huddled now in the passenger's seat, unharmed except for a small cut below her eye and a wild look. It was her window that was broken. "Go! Let's go!" Helen tried to touch her, tried to coax a story from her, some version to explain the glass, pieces of which still clung to her like ice, the animal flush in her face, but Louise would not answer. The lamplight shone in streaks through her thinning white hair, on her lips open in an unnamed fury, and it glowed in the bones of her face; she was like a painting, Helen thought later, a great beauty in a painting who will never tell, who will never reveal a thing. A brooch and a ring and a stark madness in her eye. Helen had loved this vain, private, exasperating creature for so long. They were wives, in their way. "Go!" Louise shrieked, "Go!"

So they went.

WHERE DID THEY GO?

Deep into Pennsylvania. It's impossible to describe how long it took to leave Manhattan, the eccentric streetlights, the stifled, bottled-up feeling of the traffic, the complete black-out of the Holland Tunnel as if their headlights were drilling (in slowest possible motion) into the diamond-hard center of the Earth—and Helen's eye was ever on the fuel gauge, a neon miniature pump, because it had already come over the radio that gasoline was to be rationed, along with firewood and vegetables, beginning the next day. And so that explained the crowds, the panic. Peter, smoking out the broken window, picking a piece of tobacco from his upper lip, said: "Oh it must be madness at the farmers' market." And on they went, mile after dark mile.

Three hours later they stopped at the brightest-lit restaurant they could find and ordered a gravy-soaked lunch, suffering the suspicious glances of a downy-mustached waitress who clicked her retractable pen like a switchblade. In the corner sat a silent family, dressed for church, and their teenage daughter (in flour-sack floral) with her eyes closed, wincing, as if recent events had happened just to ensure her personal humiliation.

Peter said, "You know what Gertrude Stein did?"

"What?" said Helen, dipping her fries into an impasto of ketchup. It was a relief not to care, not to pretend to care, about good food. Louise, on the other hand, looked childishly shocked at her sandwich.

Peter: "What she did in a time of disaster."

"I'm not sure I'd take Gertrude Stein's advice on disasters—"

"They lived in France when the Germans came in," he said, smiling at the waitress, who had brought his milk shake in a sundae glass, the leftover in a canister, in the old-fashioned pretense that she had made too much and was giving him the rest. The canister wore a shimmering chain mail of frost. "They would listen to the radio," Peter said, "and every Tuesday the announcer came on telling of some new city that had been taken, and it was horrible; she said it was so horrible that they laughed. Every Tuesday, it became comic. And what she did when the Germans did arrive, when she saw the planes, when the French boys all hid in the hills because they feared being taken into the German army and people left bread and cheese for them in secret places—when it was over, and they were occupied—what Gertrude Stein did was, she trimmed her hedges."

Helen noticed Louise eating just the bacon from her sandwich. "Metaphorically?"

"No, it wasn't poetic, it wasn't metaphor. She was done with metaphor," he said. "And with news. She wouldn't listen to the wireless. I think it was . . . the truth was a gorgon, and she could see it only reflected in others' faces, in Alice's, or in the girls' from the village who gave her illegal butter; but if she looked directly at it she would turn to stone. So she trimmed her hedges."

Helen looked away, to the teenage girl in the vinyl booth, who now seemed mortified almost to the point of sainthood.

"Then she was a coward," Helen said.

"We never hear what Alice did," Louise said softly.

Peter smiled and pulled on his beard. "She trimmed her hedges and she thought when she had finished trimming, then the Germans would leave."

Louise started to say something, but Peter opened his hands ecclesiastically: "She was very superstitious. She and Alice thought their car would take them to places it wanted them to go, places they belonged."

Helen's laughter rose in shining rings around them, and it was the carelessness of her voice—just as when she had laughed about the blind—that made the people stare. The gray-featured family, the anxious daughter, the waitress whose hair glowed from the light behind her. It was too wrong and strange, with the sky outside, and the world the way it was. It was a luxury. She might as well have brought out a diamond tiara and worn it just to spite them.

Louise entered loudly into the conversation: "I've been

learning French."

Helen said, "You have?"

Peter said, "Their car had a flat tire and so that's why they didn't leave France."

Louise sat up very straight. Her eyes were on Peter, and with one hand she clipped and unclipped her Turkish earring (her ears had never been pierced). She said, "I've decided that when I learn to speak French, really speak it, then this will all be over."

Peter spoke to no one in particular: "Gertrude also had a prophecy book."

Helen said quietly, "I didn't know you were learning French."

The family in the corner folded in together, listening to their daughter, who had begun to whisper with one eyebrow cocked. She glanced only once at Helen, bitterly, cleverly, before joining back into her family.

And Louise, too, looked at Helen as if to say: *Yes. I have a stupid, secret belief, a magic belief. Yes. Aren't we vain, ridiculous creatures?*

TELL ME, WHAT HAPPENED TO LOUISE IN THE CAR, SURROUNDED BY BROKEN GLASS?

She never did say whether it was young men out with crow-bars, or a stone thrown by rioters, though these explanations were very possible; perhaps she could not remember what happened, but Helen and Peter both wondered silently why the glass was outside the car and not inside.

DID THEY SPEND THE NIGHT IN THAT TOWN?

They could not imagine it—there was something hard and wary in the people's faces there, a look that Helen had seen only out West in desert towns—and the one motel sat uncomfortably far from the cluster of shops, two cars alone in its parking lot, its front office trembling with a purple glow that Peter identified as marijuana grow lamps. He also warned them that he was known to sleepwalk in strange places, ever since he was a boy. Any place would have been too strange, though, any motel or rooming house, with thin sheets and an amateur oil painting above the dresser, and brief-lived mayflies seeking the bathroom's incandescent sun, and the darkness poking in at every window like a burglar.

"I think," Louise offered once they were on the road again, with a plastic bag taped over the broken window, where it howled like a ghost, "I think we can make it to Nathan's."

Peter said, "I'm fine. I had too much coffee but I'm fine."

Louise said, "Maybe also we should—we should be careful."

"What do you mean?" Peter said.

She put up her hands to arrange her hair against the loud wind. "Maybe Helen and I shouldn't mention we're gay."

"Oh Louise," said Helen.

"You felt it. It's dangerous now, somehow. I don't know why. I don't know why just darkness would do that. But please."

"We'll get to Nathan's," Helen said. "We'll get to Nathan's in Pennsylvania and everything will be OK."

And no sooner had they crossed the state line, rounded a bend, than they came upon the incredible: a bright patch of day.

"Oh God!" Peter said. "Oh God!"

But not day—it had only the brightness, the clear ordinary delight of day, shifting and waving in the wind like a sheet pinned to a clothesline. What it was: it was a whole forest set on fire.

The cars moved in a sluggish row past this awesome thing, while helicopters busied themselves in the flames like bees in their flowers, and fire trucks sprayed long, gleaming fountains that turned, instantly, to smoke and to steam. Everything was bright and hot at last, and in some terrible way they were grateful; it was hard not to applaud whoever had done this. Peter was driving now, so slowly that he said, "Get out, you two, get out and look at it and I'll pick you up around the corner," and they did. They stood there with dozens of other people with their hands up in the air as if they were all ready to catch something, looking behind themselves and laughing at their shadows, which were back briefly from the dead and could wave at them; then the people looked at last on what their eyes could hardly bear to see: what Helen, smiling (while Louise groaned), called "the prodigal sun." It took a minute or two to make out, in that sublime light, hidden among the crackling pines, the cross-paned windows of a house.

YOU NEVER TOLD LOUISE'S VERSION OF THEIR MEETING.

If everything were saved from life, nothing forgotten, then she would have with her still the scent of Helen's hair in 1968, when they were both in their twenties and teaching at St. Margaret's—Helen history, Louise the language arts—standing very still in the back room of the library (lit only by one window and its fluorescent snow-glow) as Louise announced her engagement to Harold Foster. They were leaving for Harvard. The blond scent of Helen's hair as they embraced.

And of the room's airborne dust immobile in its web of static, and the odor of ancient, unread books and moldering maps of places that none of their students would ever visit and whose citizens would one day, not understanding why, awaken to a sunless sky. The watch in Helen's breast pocket, pressing like a tumor between them. The shiver of passion in that nubile body—gone, all of it, gone or misremembered now. But how could even an old woman forget what Helen whispered to her in that time when they were very young? What she hushed into her ear before she walked out the door—that she would find her one day—and Louise was left alone in that unused room, looking out at the snow's mounded brightness with the sensation of someone going blind.

And at the party: the feeling of someone tapping on her shoulder, and then a furious woman staring at her from across a room; it made her ill, and she had to feign a migraine to get her husband to leave.

And on the street after his death: windblown leaves scratching along the sidewalk, the wet scent of the flowers, the traffic light staring cyclops red, and, from behind her, a voice: "I found you."

DID THEY STAY AT THE FIRE?

They had to get to Nathan's, though it was hard to pull themselves away, even after they saw the burning house among all the burning trees. "Well aren't we all mayflies?" Helen whispered, giggling. Back in the car, they described the fire to Peter, what it felt like to walk a little ways down the hill to where the grass was dry and crackly, to have the hot wind on your face like a day at the beach—"God I always hated the beach," Helen added—and he nodded and they drove like that, in silence, for a long time until even looking back they could not make out the blaze except as a shimmer in the clouds, and ahead of them were blank unburned forests and the fistfuls of light they knew to be houses.

"I had a dream," Louise said softly after a while, "which was not all a dream."

Peter made a pleased noise in the front seat. Helen said nothing, only watched the black-on-black of the trees against the sky, and what she took for bats flying above, or perhaps birds, because they must wake up at last, mustn't they?

"The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space."

"I love that," Peter said. "Wander darkling."

Helen said, "Go on."

"Something . . . oh," Louise said. "Morn came and went—"



and came, and brought no day, and men forgot their passions in the dread of this their desolation; and all hearts were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light."

Helen said, "Men forgot their passions.' I don't see how that could be." There was not a single light on the road, nor anywhere in the landscape. Then they passed a darkened farmhouse and Helen thought she saw a woman in a white apron walking in a field of fallen corn; it seemed like everyone was a ghost now. But it was not a woman; it was a lung-shaped patch of melting snow on a hillside, and then it was gone.

Louise said, "I don't remember the rest. Maybe Nathan will have a copy."

Peter rolled down the window a bit, letting in the cold smell of trees. "I've been wondering, what will they do in New York when they're out of wood?"

"In the fireplaces, you mean?" asked Louise.

"I can't see men ever forgetting their passions," Helen said. "And I don't know what dread is anymore."

"When they're out of candles," Peter explained. From the backseat, they could see just his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Helen told him: "They won't run out of candles. They don't run out of those things in New York."

"Eventually. They've run out of vegetables, haven't they? And gas."

She pulled her shawl around her. "I'm not worried about New York."

In that rectangle of mirror, they could see him blink in concern. "Do you think they'll set things on fire? Like the forest we saw?"

"I know what they'll do," Louise said quietly.

Helen took Louise's hand and shook her head, looking out at the shapes of things beyond the road, things unlit for days. "I'm not worried about that, New York can take care of itself. I'm not worried about dread, either. What did you say, honey?"

"I know what they'll do."

Louise took her hand away from Helen. She put it to her own cheek as if she had been struck by something. She looked into the hatchback where their things lay, piled and gathered, and Peter's things, and then the fingers of her other hand began to curl around the armrest in a fist. Her eyes went forward. A rare car, approaching from behind, lit up the interior and her hair went white.

Louise said, "They'll burn the books."

"Lo . . ."

Louise had a frozen look on her face. "Before they burn

their furniture, they'll burn the books. Before the curtains or the sheets or their old letters. They always do."

She sat very regal in the backseat with the headlights illuminating her glacial hair, her furious jagged profile, her parted lips. The look was in her eyes again, a brightness that was not a reflection but its own light, the way the snow on the hillside was its own light, a lunacy, as if this old white-haired poetess were capable of something terrible, in which case we all are.

"They always do," Louise said loudly. "They'll take down the *Moby Dick* they've had since high school, and they always hated how it sat on the shelf and gloated at them, and they'll throw it in the fireplace, there'll be a kind of . . . relief, satisfaction. They'll light it and put the kids around it and it won't matter." Her left hand gripped the armrest as tightly as a broomstick, but she would not look at either of them. "We are truly cannibals. *Don Quixote*. Or just a whole pile of them. *Huckleberry Finn*. Why not? If there's no light to read by anyway—"

"Lo, don't—"

Peter said, "You said that when you spoke French at last—"

She shook her head, talking almost in a shout. "I'm never going to learn it. I'm too old, and of course that's ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. These are the Dark Ages now, and it's going to come to that. All the books! And why not?"

"Louise!"

Louise was shrieking now: "The books! All the books!"

The car rushed by them and they were thrown into darkness again, that old darkness, and Peter could then hear only a movement in the backseat, maybe a struggle of some kind, maybe someone crying, and then silence as his eyes strained to see the two old women in the rearview mirror.

WHAT DID HE SEE?

A memory from his boyhood: Two objects in the darkness, fallen into a quiet embrace. Just as he used to come upon his mother's hairbrush at her vanity table, lying on its back, her silver comb nestled into its bristles. A still life to which he often awoke after his sleepwalking trips. An old woman and her lover, clutching one another, the sound of one of them weeping, he could not say which, and nothing behind them but a lightless window, a mirror, a reflection of his wide eyes within it, a memory. A comb in a brush. If he watched them, they would wait. They would wait, the silver things, perfectly still until dawn. +

YOKO OGAWA

DIVING POOL

TRANSLATED BY STEPHEN SNYDER

IT'S ALWAYS WARM HERE: I feel as though I've been swallowed by a huge animal. After a few minutes my hair, my eyelashes, even the blouse of my school uniform are damp from the heat and humidity, and I'm bathed in a moist film that smells vaguely of chlorine.

Far below my feet, gentle ripples disrupt the pale blue surface of the water. A constant stream of tiny bubbles rises from the diving well; I can't see the bottom. The ceiling is made of glass and is very high. I sit here, halfway up the bleachers, as if suspended in midair.

Jun is walking out on the ten-meter board. He's wearing the rust-colored swimsuit I saw yesterday on the drying rack outside his window. When he reaches the end of the board, he turns slowly; then, his back to the water, he aligns his heels. The line of muscle from his ankle to his thigh has the cold elegance of a bronze statue.





Sometimes I wish I could describe how wonderful I feel in these few seconds, as he spreads his arms above his head as if trying to grab hold of something, leaps from the board, and then vanishes into the water. I can never find the right words. Perhaps it's because he's falling through time, to a place where words can never reach.

"Inward two-and-a-half in the tuck position," I murmur.

He misses the dive. His chest hits the water with a smack and sends up a great spray of white. But I enjoy it just the same, whether he misses a dive or hits one perfectly with no splash. So I never sit here hoping for a good dive, nor am I disappointed by a bad one. Jun's graceful body cuts through these childish emotions to reach the deepest part of me.

He reappears out of the foam, the rippling surface of the water gathering up like a veil around his shoulders; and he swims toward the side of the pool.

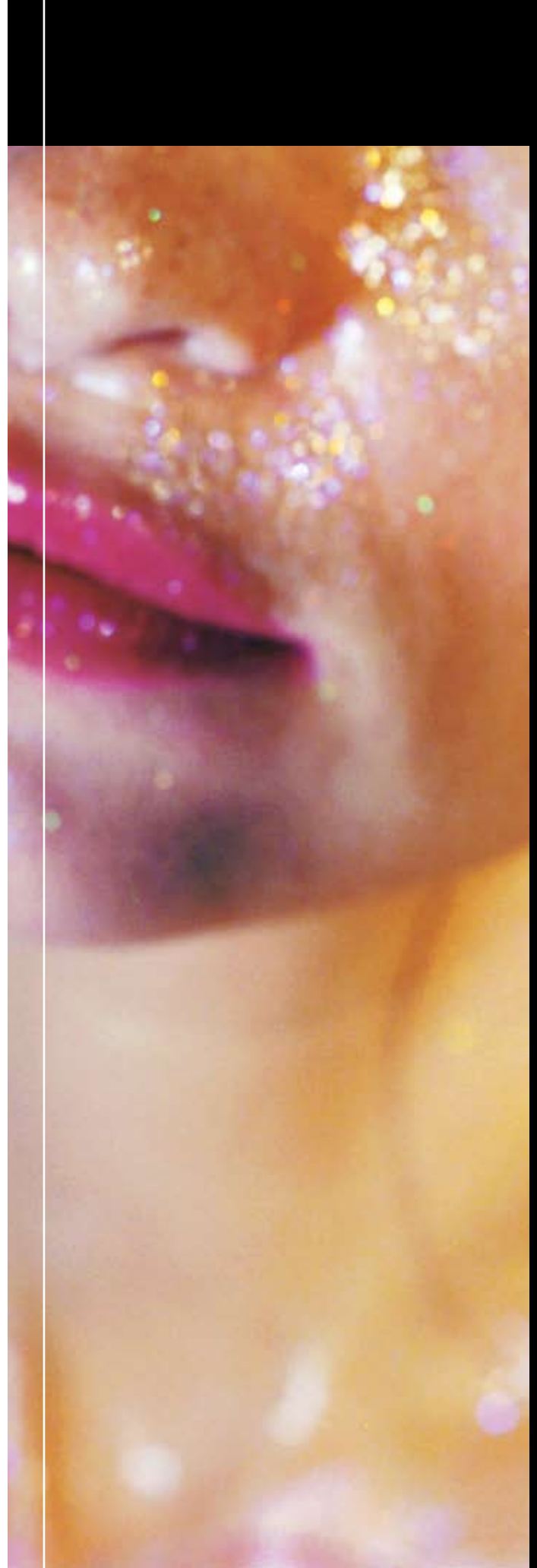
I've seen pictures from underwater cameras. The frame is completely filled with deep blue water, and then the diver shoots down, only to turn at the bottom and kick off back toward the surface. This underwater pivot is even more beautiful than the dive itself: the ankles and hands slice through the water, and the body is completely enclosed in the purity of the pool. One after the other, the divers come slipping into the water, making their elegant arcs for the camera. I would like them to move more slowly, to stay longer, but after a few seconds their heads disappear again above the surface.

Does Jun let his body float free at the bottom of the pool, like a fetus in its mother's womb? How I'd love to watch him as he drifts there, utterly free.

I spend a lot of time in these bleachers. I was here yesterday and the day before, and three months ago as well. I'm not thinking about anything or waiting for something; in fact, I don't seem to have any reason to be here at all. I just sit and look at Jun's wet body.

We've lived under the same roof for more than ten years, and we go to the same high school, so we see each other and talk every day. But it's when we're at the pool that I feel closest to him—when he's diving, his body nearly defenseless in only a swimsuit, twisting itself into the laid-out position, the pike, the tuck. Dressed in my neatly ironed skirt and blouse, I take my place in the stands and set my school bag at my feet. I couldn't reach him from here even if I tried.

I pass the shops near the station and turn from the main road onto the first narrow street heading south, along the tracks. The noise and bustle die away. It's May now,





and when I reach the station after Jun's practice, the warmth of the day lingers in the air.

After I pass the park—little more than a sandbox and a water fountain—the company dormitory, and the deserted maternity clinic, there's nothing to see but rows of houses. It takes more than twenty-five minutes to walk home, and along the way the knot of people who left the station with me unravels and fades away with the sunlight. By the end, I'm usually alone.

A low hedge runs along the side of the road. It eventually gives way to trees; and then the cinderblock wall, half covered with ivy, comes into view. In the places where the ivy doesn't grow, the wall has turned moss green, as if the blocks themselves were living things. Then the gate, standing wide open, held back by a rusted chain that seems to prevent it from ever being closed.

In fact, I have never seen it closed. It's always open, ready to welcome anyone who comes seeking God in a moment of trouble or pain. No one is ever turned away, not even me.

Beside the gate is a glass-covered notice board illuminated by a neon light, and posted there is the Thought for the Week: WHO IS MORE PRECIOUS? YOU OR YOUR BROTHER? WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD, AND YOU MUST NEVER TREAT YOUR BROTHER AS A STRANGER. Every Saturday afternoon my father looks through the Bible, carefully grinds ink on his stone, and writes out this Thought. The smell of the ink permeates the old box where he keeps his brushes and grinding stone. He pours a few drops from a tiny water pot into the well of the stone, and then, holding the ink stick very straight, he grinds the stick into a dark liquid. Only when he finishes this long process does he finally dip his brush. Each gesture is done slowly, almost maddeningly so, as if he were performing a solemn ritual, and I am always careful to creep quietly past his door to avoid disturbing him.

Attracted to the neon light, countless tiny insects crawl on the notice board among my father's perfectly formed characters. At some point evening has turned to night. The darkness inside the gate seems even thicker than outside, perhaps due to the dense foliage that grows within. Trees are planted at random along the wall, their branches tangled and overgrown. The front yard is covered in a thick jumble of weeds and flowers.

In this sea of green two massive ginkgo trees stand out against the night sky. Every autumn the children put on work gloves to gather the nuts. As the oldest, Jun climbs up on one of the thick branches and shakes the tree, and then the



younger children run around frantically amid the hail of nuts and dried yellow leaves. Passing near the trees always makes me think of the soft skins surrounding the nuts, squashed like caterpillars on the soles of the children's shoes, and of the horrible odor they spread through the house.

To the left of the ginkgo trees is the church, and at an angle beyond, connected by a covered corridor, the building we call the Light House. This is my home.

The pale blue moisture I absorbed in the stands at the pool has evaporated by the time I reach here; my body is dry and hollow. And it is always the same: I can never simply come home the way other girls do. I find myself reading the Thought for the Week, passing through the gate, entering the Light House—and something always stops me, something always seems out of place.

Sometimes, as I approach, the Light House appears fixed and acute, while I, by contrast, feel vague and dim. At other times I feel almost painfully clear and sharp, while the Light House is hazy. Either way, there is always something irreconcilable between the house and me, something I can never get past.

This was my home. My family was here. Jun, too. I remind myself of these facts each time I surrender to the curtain of green and open the door of the Light House.

When I try to put my memories in some kind of order, I realize that the earliest ones are the clearest and most indelible.

It was a brilliant morning in early summer. Jun and I were playing by the old well in the backyard. The well had been filled in long before and a fig tree planted over it. We must have been four or five years old, so it was soon after Jun had come to live at the Light House. His mother had been a chronic alcoholic, and he had been born out of wedlock, so one of our loyal parishioners had brought him to us.

I had broken off a branch from the fig tree and was watching the opalescent liquid ooze from the wound. When I touched it, the sticky emission clung to my finger. I broke another branch.

"Time for milky!" I said to Jun.

I made him sit on my lap, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulders as I brought the branch to his lips. Nothing about Jun's body then hinted at the muscular form later shining in the transparent water of the pool. My arms remember only the

softness of an ordinary small child. Like a baby at the breast, he pursed his lips and made little chirping sounds, even wrapping his hands around mine as if he were clutching a bottle. The milk of the fig had a bitter, earthy smell.

I felt myself suddenly overcome by a strange and horrible sensation. It might have been the fig milk or the softness of Jun's body bringing it on, but that seemed to be the beginning—though I suppose it's possible this terrible feeling took hold of me earlier, before I was even born.

I broke a thicker branch with more milk and smeared it against his mouth. He knit his brow and licked his lips, and at that moment the sunlight becomes intensely bright, the scene blurs to white, and my oldest memory comes to an end.

Since that time, I've had many similar moments; and I can never hear the words "family" or "home" without feeling that they sound strange, never simply hear them and let them go. When I stop to examine them, though, the words seem hollow, seem to rattle at my feet like empty cans.

My father and mother are the leaders of a church, a place they say mediates between the faithful and their god. They also run the Light House, which is an orphanage where I am the only child who is not an orphan, a fact that has disfigured my family.

Occasionally, perhaps to stir up this feeling that haunts me, I open one of the photo albums that line the bottom shelf of the bookcase in the playroom. I sit on the floor, amid the picture books and blocks, and select an album at random.

The photos were all taken at Light House events—picnics under the cherry blossoms, clam digging at low tide, barbecues, gathering ginkgo nuts—and every one is full of orphans. Like in pictures from a class field trip, the faces are lined up one next to the other. And there I am, lost among them. If it were really a field trip, it would end; but these orphans came home with me to the Light House.

More often than not, my father and mother stand smiling behind the children. My father's smile is calm and even, and perhaps a bit perfunctory, though that's to be expected for a man who spends half his life presiding over religious services and church functions, always praying his endless prayers. I gaze at the photograph of my father just as someone might gaze at the altar from a pew.

I flip sadly through the album, studying the photos. Each one is just like all the others; none records my weight or length at birth, or contains a copy of my tiny footprint, or a picture of my parents and me. Sometimes I think it might have been better if I were an orphan, too. If I could have one of the

tragic histories so common at the Light House—an alcoholic mother, a homicidal father, parents lost to death or abandonment, anything at all—then I, like all the other children, might have imagined that the nice couple who ran the Light House were my real parents, or pretended to be sweet and innocent in hopes of being adopted. Somehow, that would have made my life much simpler.

Still, when Jun disappears into the locker room and I gather up my book bag, watching as the surface of the pool becomes calm and glasslike again, or, on Sunday nights, when I listen quietly for the sound of Jun coming home through the green darkness after a diving meet—at such times I feel my desire for a family evaporate like the mist.

I grope after it, though I know it's useless. There are so many useless things in this world; but for me, the most useless of all is the Light House.

Jun came home. He had a meeting after practice, so he was an hour behind me. Once a week or so, I would manage to guess when he'd show up, and then I'd be waiting for him, casually perched on the couch or standing near the telephone in the hall. If the children or the staff or my parents—or most of all, Jun himself—had realized that I was waiting for him, things would have been terribly complicated, so I was careful to make my presence seem accidental. I felt ridiculous, but I kept to my post, making meaningless calls to school friends or flipping through magazines.

The front hall was usually quiet and empty in the evening. It is a plain room, with nothing but a frayed sofa and an old-fashioned telephone. The floorboards have a yellowish cast under the bare light bulb.

This evening, I had given myself permission to wait for Jun. He came through the door dressed in his school blazer and carrying his backpack and gym bag.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi." Spilling from his mouth, even the most ordinary words impacted me. The fresh, clean smell of the pool clung to his body, and his hair was still slightly damp, the way I loved to see it.

"I'm starved," he said, dropping his bags and slump-

ing onto the sofa, yet in a good-natured way, his exhaustion scented with the bright smell of the pool.

"I envy you," I said, leaning against the telephone stand. "You work up an appetite. But I do almost nothing and still eat three meals a day. There's something pointless about that sort of hunger."

"You should take up a sport," he said. I shook my head without looking up.

"I'd rather watch," I said, wincing at my own words.

Those hours at the pool were my private indulgence, and I sat as far as possible from the diving platform in order to keep them secret. I was also careful to avoid running into Jun or his teammates at the entrance to the gym, so it was possible that he'd never realized I was there. Still, it made me sad to think he hadn't, even though I was the one taking all those precautions.

He had never put me on the spot by telling me he'd seen me, or by asking what I was doing at the pool. But I felt our bond would somehow be stronger if he'd known and had made a point of letting me go on.

"I hurt my wrist today," he said. "I must have hit the water at a funny angle."

"Which one?"

He shook his left wrist to show me. Because his body was so important to me, I lived in fear that he would injure it. The flash in his eyes as he was about to dive, the glint of light on his chest, the shapes of his muscles—it all aroused in me a pleasant feeling that usually lay dormant.

"Are you all right? The prelims for the inter-high meet are coming up, aren't they?"

"It's not serious," he said, leaving it at that.

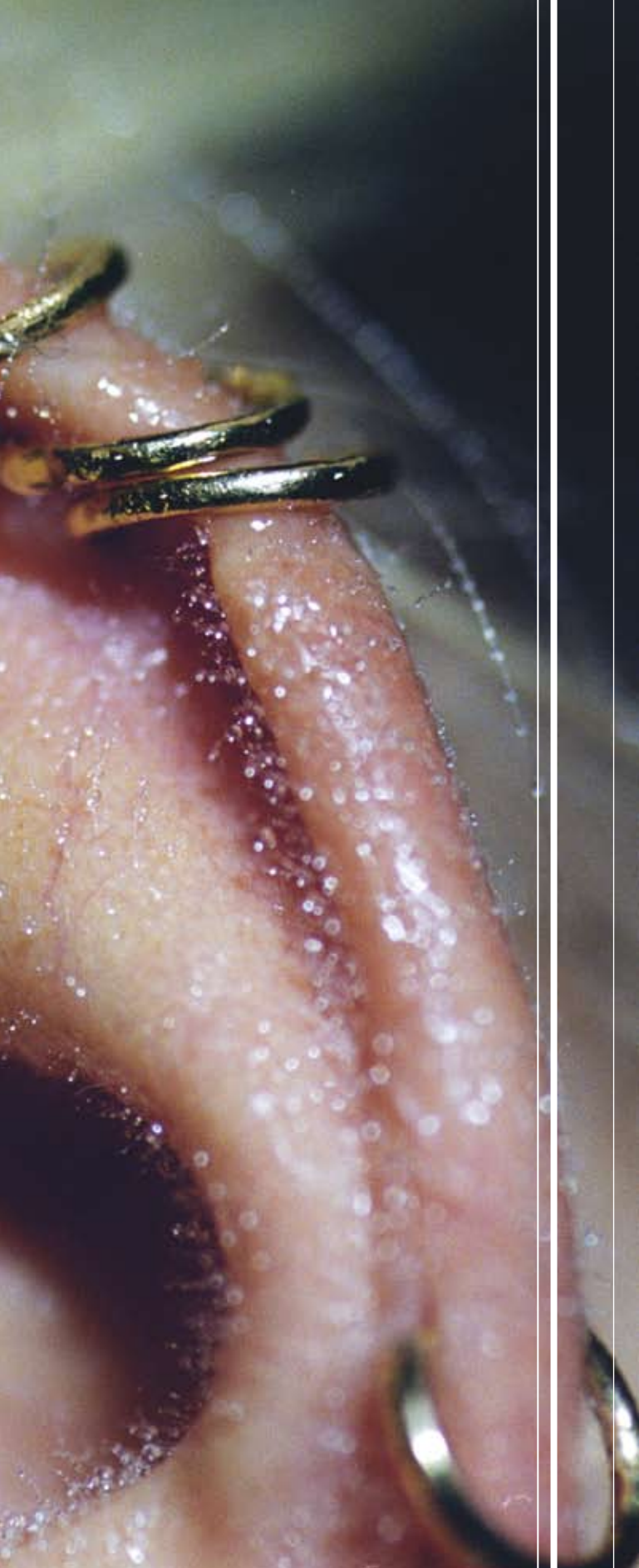
To enter the pool like a needle, creating the least possible splash, Jun had to align his wrists perfectly as he hit the surface of the water. He had the strongest wrists I'd ever seen.

Just then, we heard the sound of slippers along the corridor, and Naoki ran into the room.

"Hi, Jun! Could you do a handstand?" He danced around Jun like an excited puppy. He was three years old and suffered from asthma, which left his voice hoarse.

"OK, but not right now," Jun said, rising from the couch and catching Naoki in his arms. The children at the Light House loved Jun, perhaps because he was extraordinarily good to them. They loved him just as I loved him, and everyone seemed to want to touch him. As he headed off, Naoki still in his arms, I whispered that he should take care of his wrist.

"Then when?" Naoki whined. "And you have to walk on



your hands, too.” The rough sound of his voice disappeared down the hall.

Dinner was the strangest part of life at the Light House—beginning with the fact that the kitchen and the dining room are in the basement.

The church and the Light House are old, Western-style wooden buildings, their age apparent in every floorboard, hinge, and tile. The structures have become quite complex through frequent additions; and from the outside it is impossible to grasp their layouts. Inside, they are more confusing still, with long, winding halls and small flights of stairs.

The foyer of the Light House leads to a maze of corridors that snake through the building and eventually to a hall on the second floor that looks down on the courtyard through a window. At the end of the hall, there is a trapdoor in the floor with a heavy iron handle. The door makes a dry creak when it’s lifted. We would fasten it to a hook on the ceiling before going down the steep stairs to the dining room and the kitchen.

The children loved the secret staircase. Before every meal there was a race to see who could get to the trapdoor first—often ending in a fight. The director or one of the teachers hurried them along as they disappeared down the staircase, one after the other.

When I pulled on the rusty handle, heard the creaking of the trapdoor, and smelled the odors of the kitchen coming up the stairs, I was often reminded of *The Diary of Anne Frank*: the stairs hidden behind the revolving bookcase, the plan of the annex as convoluted as that of the Light House, the yellow Star of David, the pins in the map tracking the advancing invasion of Normandy, the gloomy, inadequate meals with Peter, the Van Daans, and Mr. Dussel. Like Anne, I could feel my appetite diminish with each step I took down the secret stairs of the Light House.

Though the kitchen and dining room are partially underground, they aren’t dark: a number of large windows overlook the garden to the south; and from the windows to the north, light filters in through the woods.

Yet here, too, there are inescapable signs of age and decay. The frying pans and pots lined up on the drying rack are scorched and discolored, and the appliances—mixers, ovens, refrigerators, and the like—sturdy but old. The surface of the enormous table that dominates the room is covered with



scratches and, in places, hollowed out by deep gouges.

Breakfasts in this dining room were almost unbearable, amid a crowd of noisy children and scattered scraps of food. At dinnertime, my father, who went to bed early in order to be up for morning services, would eat with the dozen or so younger children; and afterward I would eat with Jun, Reiko, who shared my room, the night proctor, and my mother. But even among the adults, after the tables had been wiped of the children's spills, I still found the meals disgusting.

My mother was the heartiest, most cheerful person at the Light House. Particularly talkative during dinner, she was not one to cast about for topics to include everyone, preferring to talk about herself and her interests from the moment we sat down until the meal was over. As she would grow increasingly excited and out of breath, I often wondered whether she in fact hated herself for talking so much.

On this night, I began worrying that Jun and the others were growing weary of her. Her lips were like two maggots that never stopped wriggling; I wanted to squash them between my fingers. It was pitch black outside and the glass in the windows had turned a deep shade of green, but her voice tumbled brightly on in the darkening world. Reiko and the night proctor stared down at their plates and mumbled acknowledgments from time to time.

Jun's hair was dry by then. His body seemed smaller and more vulnerable when it wasn't wet. Unlike the rest of us, he never looked bored or sighed when my mother talked too much. Instead, he listened intently to her overbearing voice, nodding politely, eating with gusto, and breaking in from time to time to ask a strategic question that encouraged her to talk even more. His voice seemed to blend with hers, and she turned to face him as her babbling became frantic.

Meanwhile I sat studying his profile, wondering how he could be so kind while I felt nothing but the cruelest sort of disgust. He would come down from the diving board and return to the Light House, where his muscles would warm and soften like floss silk, and then he would soak up all the things that set my nerves on edge—Naoki's raspy voice, the scraps of food flung about by the children, my mother's endless chattering. It seemed strange that he could be so good when life had treated him so badly. I prayed desperately to be bathed in his kindness.

The sound of children's feet came through the floor from upstairs. It was bath time: I could imagine them running around in great clouds of talcum powder. I stared at my mother's glistening lips and nudged my chopsticks against the

fatty bits of meat left on my plate. Then I passed a sauce bottle to Jun, hoping to hear him say, "Thank you"—his voice could wash away the sour feeling in my stomach.

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon. My mother and father had gone out to record a radio program for the church. Reiko was stretched out on the top bunk reading a science magazine. Jun was at the ballet class he attended every week. He had started recently at the urging of his diving coach, who said it would help him with form and flexibility. I had trouble imagining him at ballet class, accustomed as I was to seeing his body framed in sparkling water at diving practice, but I found myself feeling jealous of those flat-chested little girls in white leotards, their hair pulled back in tight buns.

In Jun's absence, these Sunday afternoons seemed somber and endless. I kept busy by reviewing for my English class; when I became bored I flipped through the dictionary at random, studying the simple yet strangely realistic illustrations: an albatross, a still, a wood box, a waffle iron.

It was a beautiful day outside. Sunlight covered the ground like a shower of gold dust. The shadows of trembling ginkgo leaves were etched sharply on the wall of the church, and the breeze blowing through the curtains carried the first hints of summer.

"Are you going to the hospital today?" I said, turning toward Reiko.

"No, not today," she replied without looking up from her magazine.

Reiko had come to the Light House less than six months earlier. My parents had carried in boxes stuffed with books and tired, out-of-fashion clothes, and then Reiko herself had appeared at the door of my room. She was heavyset and taller than I was, and she wore thick glasses. Though she was only in junior high school, her flesh seemed to sag in places, like the body of a middle-aged woman.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, lumbering into the room as if her body were a burden.

It was rare for someone as old as Reiko to come to the Light House. Most children were brought as infants and adopted while still young. Jun was the first to reach high school while still living here.

Reiko's parents were both in mental hospitals. Their problems were apparently very serious, with no hope that they would recover and return to normal life.

"They'll miss you if you don't go." I knew she didn't like talking about her parents, but I brought them up as often as

possible. The children here suffered from almost every imaginable misfortune, yet it struck me as particularly bad luck to have both parents go crazy, one after the other.

"I wish they would miss me," she said. Closing the magazine, she sat up on the bed and took off her glasses. "I'd be glad if they did." With her glasses off, her eyes were so small it was hard to tell where she was looking.

"And that's what makes you so sad?" I asked.

She blinked nervously but said nothing. Her vacant stare confounded my efforts to understand what she was feeling. Her lips were pursed in what might have been a faint smile, but it might also have been a wounded frown. There were several seconds of icy silence.

"The hooks have come undone," she said at last, as if talking to herself.

"Hooks?"

"That's right. The ones that kept my mother and father and me together. They've come undone and there's no way to get them fastened again." Sometimes she spoke like a young lady from a good family.

I wondered what sort of sound it made when the hooks holding a family together came apart. Perhaps a dull splat, like the sound of a ripe fruit splitting open. Or maybe it was more like an explosion, when you mix the wrong chemicals.

Reiko was still looking down at me blankly, the fat on her cheeks and chin hiding her feelings. She put her glasses on again, stretched out on the bed, and went back to her magazine.

Perhaps the wounds she received when the hooks broke were still raw. But since I'd never been hooked to anything, I couldn't see much difference in our luck. I turned back to the desk and began writing unintelligible English words in my notebook. The distant noise of the children had no effect on the silence that fell between us.

Even on Sundays the Light House was noisy: a mixture of shouting and crying and pounding feet filled every corner of the building like some resident spirit. An urgent knock sounded at the door, and the part-time nurse came in carrying Rie in her arms.

"We're going to take the children to the bazaar at the church, but Rie seems to be coming down with a cold. Could we leave her here with you?" She spoke quickly, rocking the child in her arms.

"Sure," I said, getting up from the desk to take Rie. "I'll look after her."

"Do you want to go with us, Reiko?" the nurse said, look-

ing toward the top bunk.

"It's very kind of you to invite me, but I'm afraid I have other things to do today." As always, Reiko's refusal was excessively polite.

At a year and five months, Rie was the youngest child at the Light House. She wore a bright red playsuit over her white shirt, and her nose was shiny and damp.

The din from the children reached a crescendo and then subsided as they left with the three nurses. I took Rie downstairs and out into the backyard.

The brilliant sunlight made the shadowy places seem fresh and clean, and the objects in them stood out vividly—a tri-cycle, a broken flowerpot, every leaf and weed. Piled by the kitchen door were cases of bottles waiting to be recycled and an empty box bearing a picture of asparagus.

After the fig tree had stopped bearing fruit, it was cut down, leaving only a small mound of earth where the well had been. Rie was amusing herself by sticking a little shovel into this mound while I watched from a short way off, seated on one of the cases of bottles.

The tiny legs protruding from the elastic hems of her playsuit looked like pats of smooth, white butter. I am always fascinated by a baby's thighs, whether they are dark and blotchy, covered in a rash, or rippling with rings of fat. There is something almost erotic about their defenselessness, and yet they seem new and vivid, like separate living creatures.

Rie was scooping up dirt with the shovel she held in one hand and dumping it into the bucket she held in the other. She had been doing this for some time, but when she missed the bucket and spilled the dirt on her hand, she came staggering toward me on unsteady little legs, crossing the boundary between bright sunlight and quiet shade. She made little pleading noises as she held out her soiled hand. It seemed clean enough to me, but I blew on her palm anyway.

Children Rie's age have a peculiar odor: the dustiness of disposable diapers mixed with the pulpy smell of baby food. But in Rie's case, there was an added scent, like fresh butter at the moment you peel away the foil wrapper.

She went back to her game, yet every few minutes she would stop and come over to have me dust off her hands. The simple regularity with which she did this gradually put me in a cruel mood. However, I didn't find the feeling particularly unpleasant; in fact, there was something agreeable about it. This malicious impulse had been coming over me quite often. It seemed to be concealed somewhere in the spaces between my ribs, and the strange baby smell brought it out, almost as







though plucking it from my body. The pain of its emergence comforted me as I stood watching Rie.

Then, while she had her back turned, I slipped behind the kitchen door. After a few moments, the dirt on her hands began to bother her again and she dropped the shovel and bucket at her feet and stood staring at her palms. Finally she turned for help toward the spot where I should have been sitting. As it dawned on her that I wasn't there, that she'd been left alone, she began crying in earnest. Her sobs were violent, seemingly about to rupture something inside her; and they were satisfying my urge. I wanted her to cry even harder, and everything seemed perfectly arranged: no one would come to pick her up, I could listen to my content, and she was too young to tell anyone afterward.

When we grow up, we find ways to hide our anxieties, our loneliness, our fear and sorrow. But children hide nothing, putting everything into their tears, which they spread liberally about for the whole world to see. I wanted to savor every one of Rie's tears, to run my tongue over the damp, festering, vulnerable places in her heart and open the wounds even wider.

A dry breeze tugged at her straggly hair. The sun was still high in the sky, as if it were no longer setting, as if time had stopped. She continued to sob violently, barely able to catch her breath.

When I finally appeared from behind the door, she wailed even louder and came running to throw herself into my arms, her buttery little thighs churning all the way. As I lifted her up and held her, the sobs subsided into pitiful whimpers that barely hinted at her vanished anger. Her little cheeks, damp with tears and snot, pressed against my chest, and with them came that strange child smell. The arrogance of Rie's self-assurance restored my savagery.

My eyes wandered to the large urn abandoned at the edge of the woods in back. Once a decoration in a hall at the Light House, it was a Bizen pot, nearly as tall as a man's chest. I carried Rie to it, rubbing her back to quiet her ragged breathing. Then I removed the lid of rotting boards and slowly lowered her inside. Her legs contracted in terror, as if she were going into convulsions, and she clung to my arms.

"It's all right," I said, shaking off her tiny fingers. "Don't be afraid."

Inside, the urn was cool and damp. She flailed about, screaming at the top of her lungs. Her cries came pouring up and into me like a stream of molten steel. I gripped the mouth of the urn with both hands to keep it from toppling over and stared down at Rie's futile struggles.

"Just a little more," I said, the words disappearing into the urn. As I watched her reach imploringly for me, my chin resting on the rim, I felt a giggle welling up inside.

I had been asleep for some time that night when suddenly I woke. The room wasn't hot, nor had I had a bad dream. Still, I was immediately awake and alert, as if I'd never slept, as if I were shining brightly in the darkness.

It was so quiet, I thought I could hear the children breathing next door. Reiko seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and the springs groaned as she turned heavily in bed. I took the alarm clock from the bedside table and held it close to my face: 2 A.M. I'd slept just two hours, but I felt refreshed. It seemed impossible that the morning was still far off.

Then, in the darkness and silence, I heard the faint sound of running water—so faint I suspected it might disappear altogether if I stopped listening. As I lay in bed picturing this stream, my mind became calm and clear.

I got up and looked out the window. The world was still; everything seemed to be asleep—the ginkgo tree, the Thought for the Week, the rusted chain on the gate—except for the water in the distance. I slipped quietly out of the room, following the sound.

The upstairs hall was dim, lit only by the bare bulb on the landing. The doors to the children's rooms were tightly shut. The floor was cool against my feet.

As I descended the stairs, the sound grew more distinct. I stood at the end of the longest hall in the Light House, the one that led to the underground dining room, and spied Jun at the sink across from the bathroom, washing his swimsuits under one of the four faucets.

"What are you doing up so late?" I said, staring at his wet, soapy hands.

"Sorry, did the noise wake you?" Even here in the dark, in the middle of the night, his voice was clean and sharp. "For some reason, when I'm washing my suits and the house is still, I can think about diving."

"About diving?"

"I go over the dives in my head—the approach, the timing of the bounce, the entrance." His hands went on with their work as he talked. "If you picture a perfect dive over and over in your head, then when you get up on the board you feel as though you can actually do it." He washed the suits carefully, turning them inside out and rubbing them against the tiles in the sink. I loved the look of his fingers, moving so vigorously.



"You love to dive, don't you?" I could think of nothing else to say.

"I do," he said. Two words, but they echoed inside me. If I could have just those two words all to myself, I would be at peace. "When I'm diving I get completely absorbed in the moment—at least for those few seconds." There was no doubt that Jun suspended in midair was the most exquisite embodiment of him, as if all his good words and deeds were wrapped around his beautiful body and left to fall free through the atmosphere.

We stood in our pajamas, our images reflected in the line of mirrors above the sink. The house was utterly still, as if only the air around us were alive. The light, too, seemed to have collected on us; everything else beyond the windowpane and down the hall was pitch black. We inhabited some separate, extraordinary moment in time.

Jun had splashed water on his pajamas, and I could see the muscles of his chest even through the loose material. I felt like a weepy child, longing to be enfolded in his arms.

"Let me help you," I said, forcing myself to sound cheerful, afraid that unless I spoke I would be crushed by desire.

"Thanks," he said. I turned on the faucet next to him and rinsed the soap from one of the suits. I let the water trickle in a thin stream, cautious not to make noise and wake someone else, ending this moment with Jun. There were five suits, and I knew the pattern on each: the one he got when he first joined the diving team, the one from a big meet the previous year, the one the children had given him for his birthday. I knew them all by heart.

As I stood with my hands submerged in the water, feeling Jun beside me, I had a deep sense of comfort. Perhaps it was the pleasure of holding something that had been so close to him. I thought back to a time when we were younger and could play together innocently, a time when Jun's body held no particular significance for me.

"Do you remember the day we had snow here in the hallway?" I asked, staring at the soap bubbles as they slid down the tiles.

"Snow? Here in the hall?" He turned to look at me.

"It was about ten years ago. I'd had a wonderful dream, and I woke up early. When I looked outside, everything was covered in snow, more than I'd ever seen. The other children were still asleep. I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs, and the hall was completely buried in snow from one end to the other."

"Really? But why would there have been snow in the

house?"

"It blew in through the cracks in the roof. The repairman came after the snow melted to nail boards over the holes. You really don't remember?"

Jun looked thoughtful for a moment. "I suppose it does sound vaguely familiar."

"Try to remember," I said. "It would be a shame to forget something so beautiful. The best part was seeing the hall before anyone came along to make footprints."

I finished rinsing the suit and set it on the ledge above the sink. Jun handed me the next one.

"It was amazing. I just stood there feeling like I was the only one awake in the whole world. But I wasn't; someone else was looking at the snow."

"Who?" I could feel his eyes on me.

"You. At some point I realized you were standing behind me, and I had the feeling you'd been there all along. You were wearing those blue pajamas with bees and bear cubs."

Jun's hands stopped moving for a moment. "And yours were polka dots," he said.

"That's right. We stood there, just the two of us—like we are now." I put the second suit next to the first one.

The memory of the soft snow came back to me through the soles of my feet—another extraordinary moment we had shared long before. I remember being delighted to be alone in that special place, just the two of us; but I'm sure it must have been even more wonderful then, when we were young and knew nothing about the pain of growing up.

"You said we should dive into it," I continued. "I was afraid, but you said it was safe, that it would be wonderful—and then you spread out your arms and fell in. You left a perfect print of yourself in the snow—we couldn't stop laughing, but we were quiet, so no one else would know. Then you pulled me in and I got snow all in my eyes."

"It was fun, wasn't it?" He sounded as though he would never know that sort of pleasure again. And perhaps he was right. It was hard to know what was coming, where our lives would lead, and it made me sad to think about the future.

I doubted we would ever have a quiet chat about the night we washed out his swimsuits. One after another, the children at the Light House all went away, leaving me behind. I had no idea how many of them I had watched go, standing alone at the window of my room; and there was no reason to believe that Jun wouldn't leave like the rest. One day he would, dressed in his new clothes, accompanied by his new family, disappearing around the board that held the Thought for the



Week. And that was why I wanted to remember the happiness we'd had together while we still could.

I washed the suits with great care, as if by doing so I could wash away my cruelty to Rie that afternoon. I needed to pretend to be myself at a younger, more innocent age: I was sure that Jun would dive into only pure water, and I wanted his dive into me to be perfect; I wanted him to enter with no splash at all.

Once we'd finished talking about that morning so many years before, we couldn't think of anything else to say. The sound of time flowing between us became the sound of the water trickling quietly from the faucet until dawn.

Spring passed, and soon it was raining every day. A fine mist, like fluttering insect wings, dampened the trees and bushes that grew around the Light House. The days dragged by; the rain seemed always on the point of stopping but never did. I felt as though I were sleepwalking at school, stirring only when I spotted Jun at the library or by the vending machines. As soon as classes ended, I headed for the sports center and the diving pool, and it was there alone, seated in the stands, that I felt myself awake.

Life at the Light House was monotonous. After the rains set in, mold began to grow down in the kitchen and dining room: a lovely shade of green on a leftover roll and a snow-white variety on the apple pie one of the nurses had baked three days before. The sight of a garbage pail full of this decay aroused my cruel streak again, and I found myself imagining how Rie would scream if I sealed her inside. She would cry until she was covered with tears and sweat and snot; then a coating of mold, like colorful fuzz, would spread over her silky little thighs. Whenever I saw the pail, I imagined the mold on Rie's thighs.

One Sunday afternoon, I was in the playroom. Three of the youngest children, still too young for kindergarten, were playing together in a sea of toys. Rie was among them.

An early typhoon had passed to the west. The rain had stopped for the moment, and I was sitting near the window, listening to the wind.

A fight broke out over one of the toys, and Rie began to cry. I went over to pick her up. As she sobbed, she wriggled her fingers between the buttons on my blouse, searching for the comfort of a breast.

"You can't go outside to play," I told the other children. "The wind would blow you away." Then I took Rie to my room.

Reiko had gone to see her parents at the hospital and wouldn't be back for hours. Rie cheered up almost immediately and began to paw at the things Reiko had piled under her desk—cassette tapes for practicing English conversation, pennants she had collected on school trips, a flashlight with dead batteries. As I watched her, I wondered whether she had forgotten that I had lowered her into the urn and let her cry.

The wind shook the trees around the Light House. The roar seemed to wash over the building, amplified by the dense mass of leaves. Under the desk, Rie was sorting through her discoveries, bringing each object to her mouth before moving on to the next. Her legs were stuck fast to the floor. Little children are like a different species, and I watched Rie the way another person might watch a rare specimen in a zoo. I wanted to pet her, to spoil her, but I didn't know how to do it.

I noticed a box wrapped in white paper peeking out from the open drawer of my desk. In it was a cream puff I had brought home four or five days earlier.

A fine rain had been falling on that day, too. The line of poplar trees around the sports center had been veiled in mist. As I walked to the station, I thought about the dives that Jun had been practicing and their degrees of difficulty. The soccer field and baseball diamond were deserted and silent, the only sound coming from the cars on the road beyond the trees.

A new pastry shop had just opened outside the center. The building was made entirely of glass, more like a greenhouse than a shop, and every detail of the kitchen was clearly visible—the knobs on the oven, the frosting bags, the knives and spatulas. Large bouquets of flowers lined the doorway to celebrate the opening.

I'm not sure why I went in. I hadn't been particularly hungry. But the afternoon was dark and gray, and the rain hung over everything like a thick cloud of smoke. The shop, by contrast, was bright and cheerful, reminding me of the glittering diving pool; it was almost too bright. There were no other customers, and the display case was nearly empty. Like everything else in the shop, it was immaculate.

The cakes were like exquisite lacework. I bent over to examine them while a young woman in a frilly apron waited to take my order. I pointed at the last three cream puffs, lined up modestly in one corner of the case.

"I'd like those," I said.

The frilly young woman carefully transferred the cream

puffs to a box, wrapped it in paper, affixed the shop seal, and then tied the whole thing with ribbon.

Carrying the cake box along with my school bag was somewhat difficult, and the safety of my new package obsessed me until I reached the Light House. I ate one cream puff and gave one to Reiko who, after thanking me with her usual exaggerated politeness, retreated to the top bunk to devour it. The third one I left in the box, which I put in the bottom drawer of the desk. Every time I opened the drawer the white box seemed out of place, there among the triangle, the stapler, and a stack of school assignments; but I had almost forgotten about the cream puff inside.

I carefully removed the box from the drawer, as if I were handling something fragile. I expected it to be heavier, yet the box was as light as . . . a cream puff. I also expected to find a mass of brightly colored mold inside; however, the pastry looked almost as it had in the store—puffy and golden.

"Rie, come here. I have a treat for you."

She turned to look; and when she realized what was in the box, she came running happily to jump into my lap.

It wasn't until I cut the cream puff in half that I realized that the sweet smell of eggs and sugar and milk had been replaced by an acrid stench, like an unripe grapefruit. As Rie's lips sank into the cream, the smell filled the room. It nearly made me sick, but Rie swallowed the pastry, her eagerness almost painfully sweet to witness.

"Is it good?" I asked; the wind smothered the question.

I put the uneaten half of the cream puff back in the box and took it down to the garbage pail in the kitchen.

The wind continued to blow as the night wore on. The heat and humidity made sleep difficult. Every time I started to doze off, the sweltering air would drag me back from my dreams. Reiko had returned from visiting her parents, eaten a few pieces of chocolate, and gone to sleep without even brushing her teeth. As I listened to her sugary breathing, I could feel any chance of sleep slipping away.

I was about to check the clock to see how much time had passed when suddenly I heard footsteps in the hall. A door opened somewhere and then closed again, and I could hear anxious whispering. I kicked off my damp quilt and unfastened another button on my pajamas. Staring at the slats of the bed above me, I tried to make out what the voices were saying. I was wide awake then, my nerves jangling.

After a few minutes, I could distinguish my mother's voice

over the rest. The others were muffled and subdued, but she sounded as agitated and sharp and somehow self-satisfied as ever. Even Reiko was roused from her deep sleep and leaned over to look down at me.

“What’s happening?” she said.

I got out of bed, ignoring her question. My body felt strangely stiff, and I realized that I was exhausted from so many hours of trying to get to sleep. I opened the door and stood for a moment with my eyes closed, waiting to adjust to the light.

“Aya!” my mother called, pressing her hand to the front of her worn nightgown. “Rie’s sick. She has a fever and terrible diarrhea, and she’s been vomiting all night. Her lips are dry and she has a strange rash. I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I wanted to call an ambulance, but your father said we should get that Doctor Nishizaki, the one with the clinic near the station. He says that because Nishizaki is a member of the church, God will look after her. They’re calling him now, but it’s terrible, and in the middle of the night—all we can do is pray. Oh, Aya!”

The words came spilling out in one breath. The night nurse and the other employees who lived at the Light House stood around her, their faces drawn with fatigue and anxiety. There was something in my mother’s tone hinting that she found the emergency almost thrilling.

I pressed my hands over my aching eyes, wondering why she insisted on chattering like that, why she had to explain everything when I already knew what had happened.

At that moment, Jun came up the stairs.

“I got through to Doctor Nishizaki. He said to bring her right away.” He went into one of the children’s rooms and came out holding Rie. She lay like a limp rag in his arms. Her cheeks and hands and thighs were covered with pale pink spots, as if her body had rotted with the cream puff and was growing pink mold.

Jun carried her down the stairs, and everyone followed. My father was waiting in the car out front, the engine already running. Jun climbed in beside him, still cradling Rie.

Though I was responsible for her condition, I found myself watching Jun instead. He seemed so brisk and decisive, and his arms were muscular as they embraced Rie. His sincerity was nearly more than I could bear.

Whenever there was an emergency—the time I fell in the river, the grease fire in the kitchen, or the earthquake that knocked over the china cabinet—Jun always managed to calm and reassure the rest of us. It was sad that someone could be so

kind. The sound of the engine faded into the night.

The others returned quietly to their rooms while my mother continued to call after the car. “Let me know the minute you hear anything! I’ll wait by the phone! If they send her to the hospital, let me know so I can get her things together!”

When they were gone, she turned to me, ready to launch a new soliloquy. “I hope it’s nothing serious—” But I just nodded vaguely and said nothing, wanting to be alone with my thoughts of Jun.

I returned to the pool as soon as I could. It seemed all the more precious after I’d tasted deeply of my own cruelty. The ripples reflecting on the glass roof, the smell of the water, and above all the purity of Jun’s glistening body—these things had the power to wash me clean. I wanted to be as pure as Jun, even if for only a moment.

In the end, Rie had gone on to the hospital. They said she vomited until there was nothing left and then slept for two days, as still and cold as a mummy. My mother went to the hospital to take care of her and came home with long reports. I wondered whether they’d found any trace of the cream puff.

I’m not sure how I would have felt if she had died, how I would have made sense of what I’d done. Because I had no idea where the cruelty came from, I could look at Jun’s arms and chest and back without feeling the slightest remorse for having hurt Rie.

I was alone in the bleachers. It was as warm as ever. Voices and splashing hung like fog over the competition pool and the children’s pool beyond it, while here there was nothing but the quiet ripple of a diver entering the water, and then another.

Jun was wearing a navy blue swimsuit with the insignia of our school embroidered at the waist, one of those we’d washed that night in the hall as we’d talked about the snowy morning. It was wet and clung close to his hips. He had a habit of pulling at the wristbands he wore on each arm as he made his way to the end of the board. Then he would spend a long time getting the position of his feet exactly right.

“Back two-and-a-half in the pike position,” I murmured.

It was a beautiful dive. His body was straight and perpendicular to the water at entry, and there was almost no splash. A few bubbles rose from the bottom, and then the surface was glassy again.

I liked pike dives better than tucked or twisting ones. When the body is bent at the waist and the legs and feet ex-



tended, the tension in the muscles is exquisite. I liked that shape of his body, with his forehead pressed lightly against his shins and his palms wrapped behind his knees.

As his legs traced a perfect circle in the air, like a compass falling through space, I could feel his body in mine, caressing me inside, closer and warmer and more peaceful than any real embrace. Though he had never held me in his arms, I was sure this feeling was true.

I let out a long breath and crossed my legs. The other members of the team took their turns, and between dives the coach shouted instructions through a megaphone. The swim team was practicing in the competition pool. A girl, apparently the team manager, was leaning out over one of the starting blocks and timing the laps with a stopwatch. Everyone except me was hard at work—but I, too, had a purpose in being here: to heal myself.

It wasn't until I'd passed the dressing rooms and the line of vending machines in the lobby that I realized it was raining. A hazy sun had been shining all day, so I was surprised by the sudden change; sheets of rain drenched the sports center, turning the poplars and the scoreboard and the soccer field dark gray. The enormous raindrops sent up miniature detonations as they hit the ground.

I stood helplessly by the door. It would take at least five minutes to get to the station, no matter how fast I ran; in rain like this I'd be soaked in five seconds. The prospect of riding home on a packed, rush-hour train in wet clothes seemed too depressing.

The couch in the lobby was already full of people waiting out the storm, while others were lined up at the pay phone to call for cabs. Seeing no alternative, I went outside. The air smelled of rain, of earth dissolved in rain. I sat down on the steps under the eaves and watched the drops pelting the ground. From time to time they splashed up on my socks.

Jun would still be at the team meeting or taking a shower, but I was worried that he would come out before it stopped raining. I had no idea how to face him if he found me sitting here. He would appear as he always did, fresh from his beloved practice; and I would be stained with the traces of Rie's tears and her rosy pink rash, which the pool had failed to wash away. I was about to run out into the rain when someone called my name.

"Aya!"



Jun's voice stopped me. I turned to find him standing above me on the steps. He looked alert and clean, exactly as I'd imagined him; and for a moment I only stared at him, unable to find anything to say.

"This is unbelievable," he said, his eyes moving from me to the rain.

"It is," I said. We stood on the steps, watching in silence. We had to stand close together to avoid getting wet, and through my skirt I could feel his gym bag rubbing against my leg.

I was grateful that he hadn't asked me why I was here, as if I had been forgiven some trespass. The rain was falling even harder, blotting out the world beyond the eaves.

"What happened to the rest of the team?" I asked. He was too close for me to turn to look at him.

"The coach gave them a ride home," he said, still gazing out at the rain.

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"Because I saw you leaving."

"Oh," I muttered. I wanted to apologize or thank him, but the words that came out of my mouth were the most dreary, practical ones: "Do you have an umbrella?" He shook his head.

"It wouldn't help much anyway," he said. "It's raining too hard. We should just stay here a while."

Stay here a while, I repeated slowly to myself, and with each repetition the meaning seemed to change, becoming "I want to stay here," then "I want to stay with you."

A taxi stopped in front of the building, its wipers beating frantically. A group of children came running out past us and dove into the cab, trailed by their mothers. But all their sounds—the hurried footsteps, the drone of the taxi's engine—were drowned by the rain. The only noises that reached my ears were Jun's breathing and the thunder.

The raindrops continued to assault us, soaking Jun's shoulder; the fabric of his shirt clung to the curve of his back; but he seemed oblivious, listening for the thunder with childlike enthusiasm.

When I was with Jun, I often thought about our childhood: I recalled all the games we had played, just the two of us, in various places around the Light House. I had been alone with him when he drank the milk from the fig tree, and when we discovered the snowy hall. None of his school friends or his teammates or the other children at the Light House shared these memories; I was the only one who had seen the expressions on his face at these moments, and I kept those images



locked away like a bundle of precious letters. Then, from time to time, I would take them out to go over again.

Still, as time passed, the letters were becoming faded and brittle in my hands; and at some point I stopped adding new ones to the bundle. Perhaps it was when Jun and I stopped being children—when the mere thought of him began to cause me pain, as it does still.

The thunder rumbled off into the distance; the rain, however, was as heavy as before. The damp spot on Jun's shoulder continued to spread, and I began to worry that he was getting cold.

"We should go inside," I said, tugging him by the elbow. He took one last look beyond the eaves and nodded.

We passed through the lobby and headed back to the pool. Several men in swimsuits and T-shirts were collecting the kickboards and mopping the deck. The lights had been turned down; it seemed like a different place. Evening had arrived here even sooner than in the rainy world outside. We sat in the highest row of bleachers, our backs against the railing. The surface of the pool rippled gently below.

"This feels strange," I said, staring at his profile.

"Why is that?" he said, turning to look at me.

"I'm usually the only one up here in the stands. I sit here all alone and watch you on the board. But today, here you are, sitting right next to me."

"You always come to watch me practice, don't you?" His voice was so warm, so full of gratitude, that I could only nod.

Your body falling through space touches the deepest part of me. I murmured in my heart the words I could never say aloud.

"I come here straight from class and just sit and watch. I don't have anything else to do. I don't exercise, I don't do much of anything. I must seem like a useless old woman to you."

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," he said. "You'll find something that's right for you eventually. You just seem uncertain right now."

"Is that what you think?"

"It is," he said, nodding.

I wasn't at all sure whether I was uncertain or not, but he seemed so completely convinced that I let it drop. I felt quite peaceful, and I didn't know what to do next. My desires seemed simple and terribly complicated at the same time: to gaze at Jun's wet body and to make Rie cry. These were the only things that gave me comfort.

The mops scraped across the floor. The water level in the pool had fallen, as if a plug had been pulled, revealing a pattern of tiles in the wall.

"You never seem uncertain," I said, kicking my toe against the school bag I had left at my feet.

"There's no time for that when you're diving." He gripped the railing with both hands and raised his body, as if about to do a chin-up. "Maybe it's because there was something so uncertain and twisted about my birth, but when I'm up there on the board I just want to dive as straight and clean as possible, with no hesitation."

I watched Jun's powerful fingers as they gripped the rail. "Do you resent what your parents did to you?" I asked.

"No," he said, pausing a moment. "How can you resent someone you don't even know?" Suddenly I was terribly sad, as if I were only just learning that he was an orphan. No matter how kind he was to people, no matter how perfectly he performed his dives, he would always be an orphan. I wanted to breathe on his damp shoulder, to warm it with my breath.

The rain was beating on the glass above us. The pool was empty of water then, and the attendants had climbed in to scrub the bottom. The diving well was larger and deeper than I had imagined. They had turned off the lights above the bleachers, as if we were descending further into the night, and we were left in the dim glow that reached us from the pool.

We rambled from topic to topic—the extra math homework, our class trip, the school assembly—and occasionally we would look up at the rain. It seemed to be slowing.

"I wonder when Rie will get out of the hospital," Jun said at last, as if this were simply the next topic in our long, meandering talk. But the mention of her name pierced me like a thorn.

"I wonder," I said.

I pictured the scene in her hospital room from the one visit I'd paid her: the walls decorated with crayon drawings, the stuffed Mickey Mouse on her bed, and Rie herself stretched out lethargically on the wrinkled sheets.

"It was you, wasn't it?" His tone was so matter-of-fact, so unchanged, that I didn't understand immediately. "You did that to Rie."

The voice was the same, but this time the words began to sink in, as if they'd been replayed at a slower speed. There was no hint of blame or reproach in what he said, yet I felt a chill come over me.

"You knew?" My voice was hoarse.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I was always watching you." This could have been a breathless declaration of love or a final farewell. "I've known

what you were doing to her for a while now.” His eyes were fixed on the bottom of the pool. “Rie’s had a hard time,” he said, his voice low and even. “Her mother was mentally retarded, and she had Rie in a restroom.”

If he had attacked me outright, I might have been able to defend myself. Instead, he exposed my secret as if offering himself to me. I was left mute, listening to my heart pounding in my chest.

I wanted him to stop talking. Anything he said would only make me sadder. Rie’s sharp cries echoed in my ears, cutting Jun’s shining muscles all to shreds. The world was spinning in front of me, as if I were falling head over heels into the empty diving well.

We sat for a moment, saying nothing. The railing had become warm against my back.

“We’ll be locking up soon,” one of the men called from the bottom of the pool. The spinning slowed.

“OK!” Jun called back. “I hope the rain’s stopped,” he added, looking up at the ceiling. As I traced his profile with my eyes, I realized that I could never ask anything of him again: not caresses, not protection, not warmth. He would never dive into the pool inside me, clouded as it was with the little girl’s tears. The waves of regret were gentle, but I knew they would ripple on forever.

“Let’s go,” he said, resting his hand behind my shoulder.

“Where?” His palm was painfully warm.

“Home, to the Light House.”

His voice reached me through the hand on my back. It struck me as a terrible joke that we were going home together, but I rose, nodding obediently. +



FACTS TOWARD
UNDERSTANDING
THE
SPONTANEOUS
HUMAN
COMBUSTION OF
ERROL MCGEE

David Means

The Fire

A violet, rash-like spume of vapors circumnavigated his ankles and then spread over his shins—freckled, smeared with age spots—until, reaching the conflagration point, he burst into a senseless mass of orange flame. Presumably he didn't writhe or squirm, because by the time the fire hit (or perhaps even before) he was unconscious. The position of his chair indicates that he probably had his heels up on the windowsill. Staring off at the lake with his feet up, the bottle tucked in his crotch, he was resting in a wicker chair, which of course remained miraculously unscorched. People found the things that weren't burned astonishing: the chair, the curtains, the porch, the cottage itself. Above his skull, on the ceiling over the chair, a large blister of seared paint had formed. The first fireman on the scene couldn't help himself. He popped it with the tip of his ax.

The Skull

There's the undeniable physical reality of the evidence: the skull, cleaned of flesh, resting on the green seat cushion; window curtains—blue swirls of highly flammable Dacron—twisting in the lake breeze, perfectly intact after the conflagration, not even a singe except where, years ago, McGee's ex-wife had let the iron rest a little too long. Again, the ceiling blister, so obviously the result of aggressive heat, but still only a blister. (Admittedly, the ceiling tiles contained some asbestos fibers to retard fire, but not enough to prevent flames from driving through to ignite the furring strips, then up into the dry-baked rafters. Presumably, a fire that was hot enough to carbonize bone—with the weird exception of the skull—would burn a structure. *Too neat*, the fireman thought, seeing it. *Too damn tidy*.)

General Conditions

Full SHC events leave nothing but a very faint trace of ash and a shadow of the deceased, if that, and sometimes a lamina of glass coating the object upon which the victim (for lack of a better way to put it) stood, sat, or reclined. Most often the victim is seated with some view or vista at hand: a lakeside or seashore or the broad expanse of some grand river, and in rare cases a wide field, or a savanna, and in even rarer cases no view at all except a television, the device then invariably implicated as the cause—or spark—of the event: blame placed willy-nilly,

in the grope for an explanation, on the shoulders of the boob tube (as it was called) and its ability to create flashes of stupid heat, produced out of the dull vagaries of mind-numb sitting when, the theory goes, all deep thoughts are purged to leave a void that is quickly filled with a flux of bodily processes: regiments of cells rebelling against a vegetative state and going haywire as they break into a symbiotic festival of self-eating—a somewhat absurd reaction, admittedly, but perhaps justified, depending on the view.

Udall's Natural Hair Ointment

McGee had steely gray hair combed neatly back and held to his scalp with a lacquer of Udall's Natural Hair Ointment, vintage 1945, large quantities of which were found in the cottage medicine cabinet and under the bathroom sink, sixty canisters in all, which led to one early theory that some of this tonic had saturated his skin and, in turn, his cell walls and somehow, when he lit a cigarette (another key bit of evidence: a soft pack of Winstons, half gone, and a box of kitchen matches on the windowsill), sparked a violent combustion.

Before he fell into the bottle in a big way, McGee had been obsessive about his bodily care, although he had shunned modern products, such as deodorant sticks, for his own methods: e.g., sprinkling his armpits with bay rum. In general, he was a man of outmoded customs: toothpicks for tooth cleaning; links to secure the cuffs; bandanas, and later fine linen handkerchiefs, folded neatly into the front pocket and occasionally taken out for a good, loud nose blow. McGee was a virtuosic nose blower, and colleagues from his early days at the paper mill, those still alive, say he blew loud enough to be heard over the roar of the press drums and even the final rollers. One dubious theory has it that intense pressure in the nasal cavities can somehow induce spontaneous combustion.

The American Dream

Back when he was the head of Mear Paper, which produced more spiral notebooks, check pads, carbon backing sheets, and lined and unlined twenty-pound bond than any mill west of Maine, he used to say: "It ain't nothing to making goddamn paper. Find a few trees, chop 'em down, mash 'em up, add water." In just a few years he went from general mill hand, to welder, to electrician, to manager, to owner and president.

Eventually, the large sludge pit to the west of the main plant and the plume of dioxins that leached into the aquifer



were blamed for the cancer cluster that stretched in a tongue shape from Drake Street—old row housing built when the wax-paper facility was erected in the early forties—to the end of Crane Avenue, where it terminated abruptly at the property line of McGee's elegant Queen Anne-style home. His subsequent fall seemed mythic to those who saw him in later years, dressed in old mill overalls stained black along the hip where his tool belt had worn a greasy spot, staggering outside Hawk's near the railroad station. Hawk's, your bottom-end drunk bar and hobo hangout set as close as it could get to the double set of tracks—Chicago-Detroit, Detroit-Chicago; Hawk's, not much more than a tar-paper shack with the obligatory single neon sign in the window, a pale pink outline of a cocktail glass sputtering epileptically.





The War in Vietnam

As one theory goes: McGee had been fascinated by the protest self-immolation of Buddhist monks in Vietnam, and once he was overheard saying he could understand the notions that might get behind a man who douses himself with gas to make a point. Inside his mill locker—which he kept as a gesture of solidarity with his employees—he had taped a magazine photo of Thich Quang Duc being consumed by flames. He studied it occasionally and marveled at the discipline of the monk in contrast to the hungry disorder of the fire itself.

He talked sometimes of napalm: In retrospect it seems fitting, to those who speculate, to note that his own son, Haze, was killed by the errant use of this weapon/product in that same war, supporting the theory that McGee's combustion was a sympathetic reaction, albeit delayed a few decades, to the news a soldier delivered one May morning to the Queen Anne house on Crane Avenue. To those who have endured the same kind of grief, it is not inconceivable that a man, on a hot summer night, reminiscing about his son, would draw up the deep pain of that loss much as a wick supposedly draws melted fat (see Wick Theory, following), and in doing so

might himself become overheated by the fires of melancholy and explode into sorrow-fueled flames.

Gloria

Some say McGee had a lover, a Chicago showgirl/call girl named Gloria, who with his help came up on the New York Central and settled into the Delvic Hotel downtown. His old friend, Marlin Duke, recalls hearing him mumble something about his love-flame, or having to attend to his love-flame. (See The Delvic, following.)

Perhaps in the white heat of memory that evening at the lake, McGee—conjuring up the smooth skin of her forearms, the glossy smooth plain of flesh at the base of her spine, the husky elocutions of her smoky voice, or more specifically the way she had stood amid the long, slanting sun shafts in Union Station one fall afternoon, clutching her bag, reaching to adjust the pin that secured her pillbox hat—had simply drawn too deeply from the well, sucking it all eagerly back, so that it stood in a status between his body and mind, in that delicate tissue, where it congealed and fermented into a single spark bright and hot enough to ignite that final, albeit limited, inferno.

The Great Depression

Temperance workers attributed SHC to drink and found a neat way to attach their moral/political agenda to the phenomenon, saying: "That's where the drunk burned, lost to the sins of corn whisky, hard cider, boot brandy, bourbon, and ripple, until his body—mercy be to the Lord our host—absorbed too much of the distillate and burst forth in a fire of Judgment." Up and down the Dust Bowl countryside, at the bottoms of hopper cars, in the corners of empty reefers, you'd find them, bleached white, skulls and feet, the relics of the Lord's Judgment left to remind the living of the need for Temperance.

Wick Theory

In one controlled experiment a sedated pig was wound in cotton gauze—wrapped tight, swaddled like a newborn—and then set ablaze to prove the "wick effect." The theory: the fire, fed by the bubbling fat wicked through the cotton, would sustain itself in a concentrated form until the fat and bones were carbonized and the cotton itself burned away and only the head, falling from the flames, would be left with the prover-

bial pile of ash and some smoke stains on the laboratory ventilation bib. Throughout the experiment, the subject's snout moved up and down, softly nodding.

Early Flame Experience

Through the smoked goggles the flame looked tight and made small, lip-smacking twists as it touched the metal and then blew out the spark bloom. At an early age McGee proved himself a brilliant welder and could draw a clean, neat line that tapered out to a beadless end. His relationship with fires in general and flames in particular was a good one, his co-workers said; and after he went to electrician school in Detroit he returned to the mill with a deep understanding of spark formation and an assured intuition that allowed him to tinker in high-voltage boxes without even shutting off the power. It was said he could grab one of the giant fuses barehanded and yank it without a flinch. How these facts relate to the overall mystery of his end remains unclear, although it is often said that beneath any mystery lies another, even deeper one. On that summer night, alone in his cottage, some speculate, he found a neat and tidy final arrangement between his abilities with electrical forces—and, in turn, with the fires they could create—and the demise he had avoided for so long while his life was moving with such vigor and ease into an ascendancy. So it seems natural to some that all of the avoided fires—the curse of any electrician—would finally come back to haunt him in one singular burst and, in so doing, provide his decline a terminal end.



Family

First the divorce from his wife, Angel, after she discovered he was hiding his lover at the Delvic; then the death of his son in the war; and then, a few years later, the automobile accident on a road north of Gary, Indiana, that took his daughter, Grace.

The Lake and Cottage

On the evening of his death the lake was serene and flat and unusually glossy as dusk hung over the water. The failing daylight lent it an unusual copper color so that, from his vantage, on the porch, he could watch as all that remained of the day poured itself out into the water and then was sucked into an obsidian form surrounded by the silhouettes of trees and, above those, a blue-black sky with stars peeking through—all this on an evening when the first hints of fall entered the air. (No one can say exactly why, but it seems important that it was a mild evening, not too hot, not too cold, and that the fire that consumed McGee could not be attributed to, say, one of the long hot spells that had plagued the state with blazes that summer.) His cottage had degenerated, from pristine and freshly painted each year to shabby and run down, with scales of lead flakes coming off the clapboards and a rank odor emanating from beneath the porch. The paving stones on the steps down to the beach had crumbled like blue cheese, and the dock, left out in the water over the years through the freezing and thawing, lurched vulgarly to one side.

Variants

Perhaps it helps to imagine those recently discovered variants of lightning that appear between sky and space along the upper reaches of thunderheads: red sprites, mushrooming elves, electric (smoke) rings clutching at the sinkhole of space.

Perhaps it helps to imagine the small sparks of current between the cell walls, bunching up into the endoplasmic reticulum, those tight nuggets of life congealing in the ribosome until, swarming like killer bees, certain charges cohere, gather heat, and then—well, then there is nothing but raw resistance and flame. Perhaps it is simply useful to remind oneself that there are still unseen mysteries at hand.

Square Dancing

Even when he was president of Mear Paper, riding shotgun

in his modified Checker Cab with its chrome sideboards, wet bar, and flashy leather backseats, he'd order his chauffeur to stop at the VFW hall so he could watch the Friday square dance called by Burt Michigan Wolverine, whose barking voice created intricate patterns as partners linked arms and rotated in that effortless yet demanding tension when there is just enough lust (and love) between pairs to make their temporary partings seem lonely and tragic until their reunifications at the end.

Potentially Related Strange Phenomena

Barns catching fire on hot summer afternoons—out of the blue and for no apparent reason; a person disappearing in the dead of night, leaving only a pile of blankets on the bed and an ash-stenciled outline of his or her last sleeping position; war hoots along the Kansas border; the lonely, dim-throated voice of Riding Thunder, or Kit Carson, seeping into the radio static.

Additional Theories: The Spiral Notebook Theory

Word was McGee had a fascination with the idea of the spiral notebook, and even claimed that he had invented the product himself. He expressed admiration for the curl of wire embracing the punched holes, drawing the pages into a tight alliance. One old timer remembers seeing him in the break room during his electrician days, fiddling with wire, twisting it around a dowel. Only through stubborn will is it possible to fit McGee's obsession with the spiral notebook with the manner in which he died that evening at the lake, and in doing so one must turn to a grand theory that includes the ideas of symmetry and of the spiral in relation to the stress—and heat and friction—produced by certain bond papers when a sheet is torn away. But that's a stretch.

Additional Theories: Dynamite

In order to make room in town for the proposed civic center, a crew came up from Chicago, examined the Delvic's structure, set packets of explosives in strategic spots, and wired them all together. There was something hopeful in their bright orange hard hats and the casual manner in which they handled the deadly materials. They spent an inordinate amount of time locating and packing the mythic main beam—that singular





elemental piece of iron that acted as the crux for the entire superstructure. They stood in the street with surveying tripods, figured the angles and odds, and estimated the rate of fall and the potential width of the dust ball that would come out of the mass of debris like a giant, furry beast. The fat, ornate facade of the hotel—which had at one time lent the town an optimistic sense of grandeur and promise, with its curly cues of rococo molding and Louis Sullivan-inspired terra cotta, and its gargoyles froglike and malformed, hunched in the top corners and visible only at twilight when the sun spread across the heavens—stood even after the blast, while the skeletal innards slid down in slow motion, the way a warm wedding cake might melt (all this transpiring in a few seconds of dust-bloom wonder); but if you looked closely, people say—people who were there—you could see the facade heaving and radiating hairline fractures as it struggled against its forthcoming demise. Other onlookers swear they didn't see a thing.

Gloria

Some say McGee was in the bleachers on Bronson Street, awaiting the demolition with the rest of the crowd, when the signal was given and the wired packets exploded and the building held still for a dignified moment, emitting small puffs of smoke. Some town folk claim that Gloria waved to him from the doomed Delvic—her hand, in a white glove, fluttering among the many pigeons leaving their roosts at the last moment. She had hidden herself in a storage closet, amid galvanized buckets and the stagnant smell of wet mopheads and pink floor soap, emerging into the empty hallway only when the evacuation team was gone and the building silent. (The common assumption is that she hid herself away with the expectation that McGee would stop the explosions and rescue her; others say she was mentally ill and paranoid and couldn't imagine herself living anywhere else. Most agree that McGee thought she was safely out of the building.)



The fire marshal says that in Chicago when they dynamited the Donavon Hotel—former home to an assortment of vagabonds and junkies, a remnant of the great flophouse culture of the Depression—they found the bodies of three men dressed in old tuxedos and the top hats of industrialists, with cigars still clenched in their teeth and cards in their hands. One, he says, had a pretty good hand, a full house, and seemed to be smiling, as if in that final moment of brain spark he had found deep pleasure not only in the good luck of his draw but also in meeting a benevolent, merciful God who could at once provide justice and allow the persistence of deeper mysteries, the things that went beyond perhaps even His (God's) own wide providence during yet another troubled period in American history. (See *The Great Depression*, preceding.) +



Bridge of Sighs

Pinckney Benedict

From the darkness of the barn, my father lumbered out into the yard, blinking like a baby in the sunlight. He shaded his eyes with a flat hand until he saw the farmer, a fellow by the name of Woodrow Scurry, standing in the stiff mud, still as a scarecrow. That was what he looked like, Scurry, a scarecrow, with his too-big overalls and beat-to-shit steel-toe boots, his hair sticking out like straw from under his ball cap.

He was leaning far forward, like whatever was holding him up was about to give. He'd been standing that way since my father went into the barn. He'd been standing just like that for a full five minutes. I was keeping an eye on him. Sometimes they went a little batty.

"I count thirteen head in there, Mister Scurry," my father said. He looked at the clipboard in his hands. "So we're four short." It was always a mystery, how many animals these fellows were hiding. It might be a couple steers, like Scurry, or it might be a dozen. It was always some, though. They couldn't help it, trying to keep something back. They didn't know how serious it was, or they pretended not to know. They were shifty and ignorant, and they were a danger to us all.

"Is that right?"

"There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed," I said. It was the first thing I had said since we got there, a thing my father always told me after he'd finished work at a place like this. "Neither anything hid that shall not be known."

"What's that?" Scurry asked. He turned to look at me—I don't think he'd even noticed I was there until that moment—and his cheeks were hollow, his eye sockets filled with shadow beneath the bill of his cap.

I was sitting on the hood of my father's big black Chrysler Imperial, long as a limousine. Most cars you couldn't sit on the hood without dimpling the metal, but that Chrysler might as well have been armored. We had ridden up here to Scurry's place from the county seat, my father and me, listening to Cowboy Copas loud on the radio and singing along with "Tragic Romance" until we lost the signal among the rocky hilltops. I was tall enough that year that the heels of my Dingos touched the chrome of the bumper. The hood ornament, the Imperial eagle that my father had ordered specially, sat calm and solid beneath my hand.



The massive motor poured out waves of warmth, even though it wasn't running. My butt and the backs of my legs tingled from the heat and ran with sweat. The bright light of the sun made my head ache, but it couldn't fill the darkness where Mister Scurry's eyes ought to have been. The metal of the engine block ticked as it cooled. Under that I could hear something else, a soft whispering like many voices. The sound of water running over rocks. I was suddenly thirsty.

The epizootic was running mad in those days, sweeping through the highlands like wildfire, threatening to clean out our valley as well. It was like a charnel house up on those high farms. And we were lucky, where we lived. In other places it had arrived earlier and traveled faster, and there was nothing left.

We heard about it on the radio. Places where there were no cattle anymore at all, no pigs, no sheep. Places where poultry barns—long white buildings holding, some of them, as many as a hundred thousand birds—had simply been set alight and burned flat.

Places where it had wiped out the dogs. I tried to imagine that, a world without dogs, but my imagination just wouldn't frame it. I thought about all our dogs, swarming the Chrysler as they would when we pulled into the yard that evening, barking into their own reflections in the bumpers, the chrome wheel wells, the hubcaps. Standing on their hind legs, grinning in through the windows at us with their tongues out, their spit flecking the glass. My father would shout at them to get out of the way, promise to run them down if they didn't shift, and they'd ignore him. A world without dogs. It was impossible.

And in some of those other places, we were now hearing, the epizootic had made the leap over into human beings.

// Thirteen," Scurry said, turning back to my father. The corners of his mouth came up in a tight, lopsided smile. There was nothing here for him to smile at. He looked embarrassed. Sometimes they were belligerent, the stockmen, sometimes they were confused, sometimes they were just humiliated and wanted to get it over with. The belligerent ones were easiest, my father said. You didn't mind doing what you had to do when a fellow argued with you. "Do you have to kill them all?" Scurry asked.

My father looked at him, then at me, peering at us again from under the visor of his hand. He had sensitive eyes and was all the time squinting against the light. "I need them all," my father said. He waved the clipboard in Scurry's direction.

"That's all I got is right in there," Scurry said. "You can look around the place if you want. All the good it'll do you." He gestured around him, at the barnyard, the barn, the house that stood crookedly, as crookedly as Scurry himself; at the pastures and the woods that stretched everywhere.

The sound of running water seemed louder to me now, and I swallowed in a dry throat. There was a creek nearby. I had spent a good part of the summer looking for a mud puppy, one of the fat brown mountain salamanders, big as your hand, and I wondered if there might not be one in some shallow cool-water pool along Scurry's creek, lurking among the stones and the ferns.

"This doesn't give me any pleasure, Mister Scurry," my father said. "I don't do this for the enjoyment of it." He was talking to me, not to Scurry.

Some of the extermination men liked their job, and some of them that didn't care for it at first got to like doing it after a while. Not my father, though. He came from a farming family himself, and killing livestock cut pretty close to the bone.

"You know what it is, don't you?" he asked me on the way up to Scurry's farm. "This epizootic, these germs they talk about. It's the Gadarene Swine. We've been told this story. If we don't stop it in the animals, it'll kill everything. This fellow"—he glanced at the clipboard that sat beside him on the wide bench of the Imperial—"this Scurry, he'll say, 'Please don't do this, mister.' He'll beg me. But will I listen to him?"

"You won't," I told him.

"No, I won't," he said.

Ihopped down off the hood of the car and went around to the trunk. My old man had opted for the Flight Sweep trunk lid, the one with the shape of a spare tire stamped into it. It was supposed to be fancy, but it looked like a toilet seat to me. He cared for it, though. He got everything extra there was to get on that car. He said he felt like he deserved it, with the work he was do-

ing. He could afford to, I guess, with the bounties from the epizootic. We never had anything like that Imperial before. I popped the lid.

The Exterminator sat in the trunk, goggling up at me with its cloudy glass eyes. It gave me a thrill to look into them, like looking at death and seeing myself reflected there. Twice, once in each lens. The Exterminator had a long, flexible snout, like an elephant's. Skin like an elephant's, too, thick and gray and wrinkled. No mouth. Massive sausage-fingered hands.

My father didn't do the killing. The Exterminator did the killing. It kept the demons off of him, and it did the killing for him, and it kept him clean and safe inside it, no matter what went on outside. He was like Jesus, in a way.

My father was talking to Scurry in low tones. Explaining to him what was about to happen. Showing him the paperwork on the clipboard. Explaining how it was good agricultural hygiene, and it was the only acceptable way, and it was the law. Scurry just kept wagging his head. I laid hold of one of the Exterminator's legs and dragged it out of the trunk. The rubber was heavy and cool and slick. I put one foot on the ground behind the car. The leg stood up by itself, folding over at the knee. I got the other leg, stood it beside the first. Then I went after the body, the coverall and the apron. Assembling the Exterminator: that was another one of my jobs.

I wouldn't touch the head. That was the one part I wouldn't do. The head just lay there in the well of the trunk, right next to the star wrench and the rear evaporator and the bolted-down spare tire with its brand-new tread. The head peered up at me as I worked. It seemed like it wanted to tell me something, but with no mouth there was no way for it to speak. What kind of voice would it have, if it could speak? A voice like the crunch of dead leaves under a boot, I thought, soft and mean and brittle.

The Exterminator made my father look like something other than my father, made him look like a giant insect. But really he was a good and happy guy, always whistling and humming around the house. My mother loved him, and she would never love anyone bad.

"You just sit up there on your porch," my father told Scurry. Scurry stood with the paperwork clutched in his hand. The hot sunlight was getting to him too; he was a thin, dried-out-looking guy, but he had big sweat stains down his back and under his arms, darkening the fabric of his shirt. It was hard to believe he had that much water in him to lose. The papers he held were wrinkled and damp. I was still thirsty.

"It's hot as blazes out here in the sun. Be cool," my father

advised him. "Be comfortable."

They always hid the animals, but they never hid them well. It wasn't in their nature. My father always found them. Usually they just put them in an unused shed or barn. Sometimes we'd find a calf or two bawling and half-crazed, standing knee-deep in the water of a cistern. I think the farmers knew my father would find them, or somebody, the sheriff if we had to call him, so they didn't go to a whole lot of trouble.

One guy hid a bunch of Angus in an abandoned saltpeter mine at the back of his farm, and it took my father the better part of a day to figure out where they were, trudging across the fields, peering into empty outbuildings and tilting silos. They were miserable, those half-dozen bulky steers huddled together in that wet, shallow cave. Their moaning sounded like they were trapped in a tin can.

The humane killer stayed in its box next to the jack. I didn't touch the killer either. It was off-limits. The head of the Exterminator wasn't off-limits; I could have touched it if I wanted to. But it gave me the shivers, the way it looked at me. Its missing mouth, its snorkel nose. The flat black circles of its eyes.

The killer looked like a long, skinny hammer. Stamped into the handle were the words W. W. GREENER LONDON & BIRMINGHAM. The Greener company made the killer, and they made shotguns too. Expensive shotguns. Fancy, like the Imperial. My father had started talking about one day buying himself a Greener 12-gauge side-by-side, for bird hunting. A Greener with a tight choke on it had a long reach, he told me. Pick up those whitewings far down the field, the ones that were always getting away from him.

Below the maker's stamp it said GREENER'S .455 HUMANE CATTLE KILLER. When I was younger I thought it said "Human Cattle Killer," and that was an idea that gave me nightmares. For a while I saw a lot of people like that. The Fuller Brush man when he came to the door to sell trinkets and to sharpen knives, he was a sad-eyed Jersey. The man behind us in line at the post office, looking at my mother, his nostrils flared, his head tossed: a Brahma bull. The men in the bar-





bershop sighed and grunted like the gentle Herefords just up the road at Seldomridge's. But then I asked my father, and he explained to me that "humane" just meant kindly. Gentle. After that I didn't see the human cattle so much anymore. When you're a kid you'll believe anything is possible.

None of the other extermination men used a killer like my father's. Some of them used what they called captive-bolt pistols, and most of the rest just used a rifle behind the ear. One great tall man used nothing but an eight-pound Master Mechanic's sledge. But my father used the Greener, which seemed like a privilege, since it had come so far and from such a prestigious manufacturer.

A fellow named John Keeper gave it to him. My father had worked with him at the big state abattoir up at Denmar. The slaughter line was the job my father had before he took this one. They recruited almost all the extermination men from their jobs at the state slaughterhouse, but they never got John Keeper. He just walked off one day: handed the Greener to my father and got in his truck and went. And then the Greener was my father's.

My father struggled into the Exterminator's hip boots and lifted the rubber apron out of the trunk. He nodded at me and I retrieved the disinfectant sprayer, sloshed it back and forth, the gurgle in the canister telling me that we had plenty. That was another one of my duties: spray him down after he had done the job, pump the disinfectant—the sprayer looked just like a big bug sprayer in the cartoons—all over the Exterminator until it was shiny and wet and gave off a smell like ammonia and licorice.

That disinfectant smell, which could beat the odor of the demons, the stench of blood and brains, of shit and fear—that smell had come to mean the end of the day's work to me. It meant getting in the car and driving back home, back into the valley. Cranking up the air conditioning and turning on the radio and singing along at the top of our lungs as we rolled along the narrow blacktop, back toward our house and our yard and our dogs. Maybe Pee Wee King would be on the air when we got back in range of the station. I loved good old Pee Wee King.

After we got home, my father would do the job a second time, pin the Exterminator up over the clothesline and scrub it down with a long-handled, stiff-bristled brush. The dogs would loop around his legs. I could almost like the Exterminator then. It looked harmless, pinned to that line with its gangling arms outstretched, its mouthless face tilted toward the ground as my father went after it with the brush, sweating

and grunting with the effort. It was really getting the treatment then, and I could feel sorry for it.

But right after the job—right then, as I pumped away at the sprayer as hard as I could, working the piston until my arms were sore—then I often pretended that the choking cloud I was soaking it with was acid, that it would melt the Exterminator down, melt it like a lead soldier on the stove and leave just him, leave just my father standing there in the puddle of it.

"Keep him company, you hear?" my father told me. He meant Scurry. I lowered the disinfectant sprayer, which I had been holding like I was ready to use it. But the job wasn't done yet, the job hadn't even begun. To Scurry he called out, "My boy here has some stories he can tell you. He doesn't look like much, but he can spin a tale." Thirteen steers was going to take him a while, after which we would have to find the hidden ones. He touched the side of his nose with one of the Exterminator's gross gray fingers, and I knew that meant I should find out where the remaining steers were.

He pulled on the head of the Exterminator, fumbling a little because the gloves made his hands clumsy. He twisted the head from side to side until it sat comfortably and he could see out through the goggles. He gave the top of its skull a funny little pat to show me that he was still in there, shifted his shoulders to loosen them, and then set off with the Exterminator's sloshing gait toward Scurry's barn.

We were sitting around watching TV one evening, about the time my father left the state abattoir, my mother and father and my little brother and me. A cartoon was on, and it was a surprise and a pleasure to be able to watch a cartoon in the evening, because mostly it was just news programs about the war and other things I didn't much care about. The epizootic was just beginning to get a grip around that time. Most people didn't even believe in it yet, I don't think.

The cartoon was funny at first, and I enjoyed it, two men that hated each other fighting in various ingenious ways, ways you'd never think of, with magnets and rockets and matches and rubber bands, hurting but never killing each other. I had the idea it was a very old cartoon of a sort they didn't make much anymore. We were all enjoying it, even my mother, who hated anything violent or cruel, and my little brother, who was scared of most things. It was the difference my father marked

between us, because we were only a year apart in age. Similar in size and appearance, and people often mistook us for twins: I was the one who didn't get scared, and my brother was the one who did.

But then the cartoon changed. It seemed like the two men had run out of inventions and ideas for ways to hurt each other, and they just began hitting each other over the head. *Wham, wham, wham*, with these hammers, great wooden mallets. I knew about the man from the abattoir who killed with the eight-pound sledge. This was how that man spent his days, I thought. On and on. He had grown a hump, a big ridge of muscle between his shoulders, from swinging that sledge.

My mother and my brother were fixated. I could see them out of the corners of my eyes. My father was sitting in the big chair directly behind me. It seemed like the two men hitting each other was going on too long. I'd been sitting cross-legged in front of the television for hours, watching this one thing over and over. My face ached from smiling at the cartoon, and my lungs hurt from laughing. My mother and brother were laughing too. Tears were shining in their eyes. The music was strange and full of foreign, shouting voices and sounded like it was made out of metal; "The Anvil Chorus," I have since learned it's called, an Italian song. I tried to blink, but my eyes stayed open.

I wondered if my father was trapped the same way we were. Was he watching? I couldn't hear him laughing. If I could get him to understand what was happening—that the cartoon wouldn't end—then he'd figure some way to free us. He'd switch off the TV. Above the metal music that was whamming away, I could hear the wind rising. It was howling around the eaves of the house. The ground started chattering under me, as though it were trembling from the cold. I felt sick, and I was still laughing and grinning.

I cranked my head around. I've never done any harder work than that: the air was as thick as oil; I thought at any second the bones of my neck would crack and splinter. And I saw, sitting in my father's chair, the Exterminator, its glass eyes reflecting the television screen: the bright colors, the hammers rising and falling. My own body in the center of each eye, flat like a cardboard cutout. I stopped grinning. I stopped laughing. I screamed.

My mother leaped up. My father gaped at me—it was him and not the Exterminator at all. My little brother ran from the room. They had not been laughing. I turned back to the TV, and it was easy to move my head this time. There was no cartoon on the screen. It was the news. On the news, a man with

a flamethrower strapped to his back was burning out a bunker while other soldiers watched. They were smoking cigarettes.



That's a terrible story," Scurry told me.

Bang. And Scurry jumped. It had started and it wouldn't stop. Twelve more times, and I knew Scurry would jump every time. They never got used to it. We sat on his porch. I wanted to ask him for something to drink, because I was thirsty beyond belief, but I knew it wouldn't be right to ask him for a favor while the Exterminator was killing his cattle.

"You ought not to tell stories like that," Scurry said.

"I made a mistake," I said. "I thought it was a cartoon on, but it was the war. I thought everyone was laughing and enjoying themselves, but they weren't."

"Do you make a lot of mistakes like that?" Scurry wanted to know.

"I used to," I said, "when I was little. But I've learned to tell the difference a lot better these days. Between what's happening and what I think is happening. My father helps me with that."

I was pretty sure that this conversation was actually taking place between us. Scurry's words matched up pretty well with the movement of his lips. I could hear voices too, little quiet voices in the distance—no idea what they might have been saying—but they didn't worry me, because they sounded like the voices that come from a radio that's on with nobody paying attention to it, way in the back of a house somewhere. Maybe it was the water I had heard earlier, the creek. I licked my burning lips.

Bang. Scurry jumped again. "What happens next?" he asked.

I didn't know exactly what he meant. Did he mean what happened next in my story? Next my old man picked me up and shook me and my mother cried and my little brother cowered in his room like the scared pissant he was. Next my old man told me, *Don't you ever scream like that again. You're frightening your mother. You're frightening your brother.* That's what happened next: exactly what you might expect.

I didn't say anything about the cartoon, but my father seemed to know. He knew that the world had stopped matching up to itself for a while, and now that I had screamed it was matching up again, rolling along just like it was supposed to. He knew that sometimes it stopped matching up. You didn't need to scream when that happened. You didn't need to look around. You just waited for it to start matching up again.

These were all things my father told me later, when we took to riding in the Imperial together. About the world jumping its tracks, and how you just held on until it came back onto them again. Not to scare the women and the little kids—that was half the job, when you were a man and the world got trapped in itself, turning over and over and seeming like it would never stop.

Was that what Scurry meant when he asked, “What happens next?” Or did he mean what would happen next on his farm?

Bang. Jump. That’s what.

asked my father what happened to John Keeper after he handed over the killer and walked out.

“He crossed the Bridge of Sighs both ways,” my father said.

The Bridge of Sighs was the ramp of steel grillwork that led up onto the slaughter line. It was where the animals came to be slaughtered, shouldering one another out of the way to get to the other side like they were getting on Noah’s Ark or something, the stock handlers sticking them with poles and electric jolts. The metal incline clanged and echoed from the blows of hooves, and the bellowing and wailing rang off its surfaces. It was the way the workers came in as well, the men who stood on the slaughter line. They wore rubber hip boots, and their feet made no sound on the bridge at all.

You never crossed the Bridge of Sighs both ways. That was what they said. The animals, because when they went in, they died. And the men, because when they went in, they never left. Maybe their bodies did, but not their minds. They stayed in the state abattoir forever. All except John Keeper, who handed the Greener Humane Killer to my father and strode into the outside and was never seen again.

“But you left,” I said to my father.

“No,” he said. “I’m still there.”

“It’s not him that’s doing the killing,” I told Scurry. “It’s the Exterminator.” When he looked at me like he didn’t understand, I added, “The suit. The rubber suit.”

Scurry shook his head. “No,” he said. “It’s him. He’s doing the killing all right. The suit just keeps the blood and the gore off him.”

I decided not to argue.

It was then he asked if I wanted to go down to the creek. He said he had something he wanted to show me. I hoped he





meant a mud puppy even as I knew he didn't. How could he have known what I had spent my summer looking for? He just wanted to get away from what was happening in his barn. Still, I asked him, "Do you have mud puppies along in there?"

Bang. But this time he didn't jump. I liked him for that. He was getting used to it.

"Mud puppy?" he said. "You mean those big lizards?"

"Salamanders," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "We call them water dogs up this way. But we've got them. Keep your eyes open and you might see one."

We followed a little gully that opened beside his house, followed it as it deepened, became a steep, rock-sided ravine. An easy climb down but a tough climb back up. I wondered how Scurry would handle it.

The voices in the creek sounded pleased to be talking. They never seemed to repeat themselves. I wanted to kneel down and get a big drink. The water was clear, the rocks of the streambed smooth and clean beneath its moving surface; it looked cool. The sunlight wasn't so bright here in the shadow of the trees that grew along the banks of the creek, broken up as it was by the branches, with their hefty loads of leaves. I wanted to lean down and cup handful after handful of the cold water into my mouth.

My father jumped out at my little brother and me from behind the front door of our house. We'd just come home from school. He was wearing the Exterminator, the first time he'd put it on, and he thought it would make a good costume to surprise and scare us. My little brother disappeared for a couple of hours, didn't even make a sound, just vanished back through the door. I stood like I was rooted as this thing, this bug, lurched toward me, its arms outstretched.

When it reached me, it swept me up in a great big embrace. It lifted me up high, and my head brushed the ceiling, exactly the way it did when my father picked me up. Even through my clothes, the touch of the Exterminator was clammy and dank, like something freshly dead. It smelled like a public swimming pool as it nuzzled its face against my cheek. I was stiff. It was trying to kiss me, or eat me, one or the other. It bashed me in the eye with its short, swaying trunk of a nose.

My eyes were near to its eyes. Up close like that, the eyes didn't reflect. I could see through them. I could see inside the

head of the Exterminator, into its skull, into its brain. And what I saw, behind its blank eyes, were the fond, familiar eyes of my father. I suddenly thought, *This is what it's like to be a grown-up man.*

My mother drifted through then, scolding my father, slapping at him, her hands making wet noises against the flabby skin. "Put the boy down, for the Lord's sake," she said. "Can't you see he's frightened to death?" I wanted to laugh, but my tongue was still caught against the roof of my mouth. I couldn't say anything. "What gets inside you?" she continued. "I swear I don't know."

Then she noticed that my brother was gone, and the search for him began. We didn't find him until well after dark, hiding among the foliage of one of the great silver maples in the back, twenty feet off the ground. It took my father another hour and an extension ladder borrowed from the people across the road to finally get him down.

Scurry didn't seem interested in that story either. It always made my father laugh to think of my brother way up in that tree. He was not much of a tree climber, my little brother, either before or after that first encounter with the Exterminator. But Scurry didn't smile or anything.

"There's not really any mud puppies down here, are there?" I asked him. He shook his head sorrowfully, like he regretted having told me an untruth.

"There used to be, when I was a kid," he said. "I don't know what happened to them since then."

Bang. Very muted and far away. I had lost count, but it had to be pretty near the end now. My father would come back out of the barn and he'd be looking for me to have the disinfectant canister out, ready to spray him down and help him get out of the sweaty, foul-smelling Exterminator. He would want me to put it back into the trunk of the Imperial, where it belonged.

We came to a point where the creek shallowed and broadened, parting around a small, sandy island in the middle of the current. On the island stood the missing cattle, bunched together and gazing at the sheet of water that passed near their hooves. I should have guessed they were what Scurry wanted me to see. Sometimes that happened: the farmers just gave in and took us to their hidden animals. I was glad I hadn't drunk from the creek, downstream from the beasts as we had been. Cholera, diphtheria: it would all be in the water from their waste.

The little group of cattle broke apart when they saw Scurry. They thought he was bringing fodder with him.

They were well fed and sleek, and I knew how much effort it was, bringing feed down to them in this rocky place, so far from his house. How hard he was working to keep them alive and safe on their little island.

And I saw that there was something else on the island with them. Something small and terrible in the shifting green shadows beneath the trees. Something that had been hidden behind their bulk. One of the mutants that I had heard the epizootic could bring about. Misshapen: six legs, maybe seven. Grotesquely twisted body. Two heads. My breath stopped in my throat, and I felt the world begin to unhinge. A monster. Time would stop, down here by the island. Who knew how long I would spend in this ravine, with Scurry and his horrible calf. Maybe an eternity.

"You see?" Scurry said to me. "They're not sick. These ones aren't. You can see that, can't you?"

The water was talking. Or maybe it was my father, calling out from the barnyard. He had probably wrestled the Exterminator's head from his own, the job done, and he was wondering where I had got to. Me and Scurry. Maybe he was even a little afraid, alone like that. One of the monster calf's heads wailed, and the other answered it. Their bawling bounced crazily off the rock walls around us and drowned out the voices of the water.

Then I looked again and saw that it was no monster. It was just two spring calves, two little bulls standing folded together, twins and small for their age. One of them trotted down to the edge of the island and sank its muzzle into the water and started to drink. My dry throat tightened.

Scurry's voice was loud in my ear. "Nothing," he said. My father would soon find us, the way he had found my little brother, way up in that tree. "There's nothing at all wrong with them, is there?" he said to me. He wouldn't be satisfied until I said it. My saying it would do nothing, it wouldn't change what had to happen, but he wanted me to witness, to tell him what he already knew. Nothing was wrong. Nothing wrong at all. +



Still Life

Noel Coward

NOEL COWARD'S *Still Life* WAS THE BASIS FOR THE 1945 DAVID LEAN FILM *Brief Encounter*, NOMINEE FOR THREE ACADEMY AWARDS AND WINNER OF THE GRAND PRIX AT THE 1946 CANNES FILM FESTIVAL. IN DESIGNING THE FORTHCOMING FALL 2007 ISSUE OF *All-Story*, ACTOR TIM ROTH MENTIONED *Brief Encounter* AS PRINCIPAL INSPIRATION AS HE PREPARED FOR THE LEAD ROLE IN FRANCIS COPPOLA'S RECENTLY COMPLETED FILM, *Youth Without Youth*.

SCENE I

The SCENE is the refreshment room of Milford Junction Station.

On the right of the stage is a curved counter piled with glass cases containing sandwiches, rock-cakes, etc. There are rows of teacups and glasses symmetrically arranged, an expression of the fanciful side of MYRTLE'S imagination. Schweppes bottles of soda and tonic water have been placed in circles and squares. Even the rock-cakes mount each other on the glass stands in a disciplined pattern. There is a metal machine which gushes hot tea, a sort of cylindrical samovar.

For drinking hours there are the usual appurtenances for the drawing of draught beer, and the wall behind the counter, except for a door up stage, is lined with looking-glass shelves supporting bottles, packets of chocolate, packets of cigarettes, etc.

There are two windows in the left wall. Between them is a door leading onto the platform. There is a table against the back wall, a stove in the corner, and two more tables against the left-hand wall. There are several advertisements and calendars in frames, and on each table is a vase containing very bright artificial flowers.

MYRTLE BAGOT herself is a buxom and imposing widow. Her hair is piled high, and her expression reasonably jaunty, except on those occasions when her strong sense of refinement gets the better of her. BERYL WATERS, her assistant, is pretty but dimmed, not only by MYRTLE'S personal effulgence, but by her firm authority.

When the CURTAIN rises it is about 5.25 p.m. on an evening in April. The evening sunlight streams through the left-hand windows, illuminating gaily the paraphernalia on the counter.

A YOUNG MAN in a mackintosh is finishing his tea at the upstage c. table and reading an evening paper. LAURA JESSON is sitting at the downstage table, having tea. She is an attractive woman in the thirties. Her clothes are not particularly smart, but obviously chosen with taste. She looks exactly what she is—a pleasant, ordinary married woman, rather pale, for she is not very strong, and with the definite charm of personality that comes from natural kindness, humour, and reasonable conscience. She is reading a Boots library book at which she occasionally smiles. On the chair beside her there are several parcels, as she has been shopping.

STANLEY enters from the platform. He wears a seedy green uniform and carries a tray strapped to his shoulders. He goes to the counter. He addresses MYRTLE with becoming respect; BERYL, however, he winks at lewdly whenever the opportunity occurs.

STANLEY: I'm out of "Maries," Mrs. Bagot, and I could do with some more Nestlé's plain.

MYRTLE (*scrutinizing the tray*): Let me see.

STANLEY: An old girl on the four-ten asked if I'd got an ice-cream wafer. I didn't 'arf laugh.

MYRTLE: I don't see that there was anything to laugh at—a very natural request on a faine day.

STANLEY: What did she think I was—a "Stop me and buy one"?

(BERYL *sniggers*.)

MYRTLE: Be quiet, Beryl—and as for you, Stanley, don't you be saucy. You were saucy when you started to work here, and you've been getting saucier and saucier ever since. Here you are— (*She gives him some packets of biscuits and Nestlé's chocolate.*) Go on, now.

STANLEY (*cheerfully*): All right! All right!

(*He winks at BERYL and goes out.*)

MYRTLE: And see here, Beryl Waters, I'll trouble you to remember you're on duty—

BERYL: I didn't do anything.

MYRTLE: Exactly—you just stand there giggling like a fool. Did you make out that list?

BERYL: Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE: Where is it?

BERYL: I put it on your desk.

MYRTLE: Where's your cloth?

BERYL: Here, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE: Well, go and clean off Number Three. I can see the crumbs on it from here.

BERYL: It's them rock-cakes.

MYRTLE: Never you mind about the rock-cakes; just you do as you're told and don't argue.

(*BERYL goes to clean the table up* L. ALBERT GODBY enters. *He is a ticket inspector, somewhere between thirty and forty. His accent is North Country.*)

ALBERT: Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!

MYRTLE: Quite a stranger, aren't you?

ALBERT: I couldn't get in yesterday.

MYRTLE (*bridling*): I wondered what had happened to you.

ALBERT: I 'ad a bit of a dust-up.

MYRTLE (*preparing his tea*): What about?

ALBERT: Saw a chap getting out of a first-class compartment, and when he come to give up 'is ticket it was third class, and I told 'im he'd 'ave to pay excess, and then he turned a bit nasty and I 'ad to send for Mr. Saunders.

MYRTLE: Fat lot of good he'd be.

ALBERT: He ticked him off proper.

MYRTLE: Seein's believing—

ALBERT: He's not a bad lot, Mr. Saunders; after all, you can't expect much spirit from a man who's only got one lung and a wife with diabetes.

MYRTLE: I thought something must be wrong when you didn't come.

ALBERT: I'd have popped in to explain, but I had a date and 'ad to run for it the moment I went off.

MYRTLE (*frigidly*): Oh, indeed!

ALBERT: A chap I know's getting married.

MYRTLE: Very interesting, I'm sure.

ALBERT: What's up with you, anyway?

MYRTLE: I'm sure I don't know to what you're referring.

ALBERT: You're a bit unfriendly all of a sudden.

MYRTLE (*ignoring him*): Beryl, hurry up—put some coal in the stove while you're at it.

BERYL: Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

MYRTLE: I'm afraid I really can't stand here wasting my time in idle gossip, Mr. Godby.

ALBERT: Aren't you going to offer me another cup?

MYRTLE: You can 'ave another cup and welcome when you've finished that one. Beryl'll give it to you—I've got my accounts to do.

ALBERT: I'd rather you gave it to me.

MYRTLE: Time and taide wait for no man, Mr. Godby.

ALBERT: I don't know what you're huffy about, but whatever it is I'm very sorry.

MYRTLE: You misunderstand me—I'm not—

(ALEC HARVEY enters. He is about thirty-five. He wears a moustache, a mackintosh, and a squash hat, and he carries a small bag. His manner is decisive and unflurried.)

ALEC: A cup of tea, please.

MYRTLE: Certainly. *(She pours it out in silence.)* Cake or pastry?

ALEC: No, thank you.

MYRTLE: Threepence.

ALEC *(paying)*: Thank you.

(He takes his cup of tea and goes over to the table up L. He takes off his hat and sits down. LAURA glances at the clock, collects her parcels in a leisurely manner and goes out onto the platform. BERYL returns to her place behind the counter.)

BERYL: Minnie hasn't touched her milk.

MYRTLE: Did you put it down for her?

BERYL: Yes, but she never came in for it.

MYRTLE: Go out the back and see if she's in the yard.

(BERYL goes.)

ALBERT *(conversationally)*: Fond of animals?

MYRTLE: In their place.

ALBERT: My landlady's got a positive mania for animals—she's got two cats, one Manx and one ordinary; three rabbits in a hutch in the kitchen, they belong to her little boy by rights; and one of them foolish-looking dogs with hair over his eyes.

MYRTLE: I don't know to what breed you refer.

ALBERT: I don't think it knows itself—

(There is a rumbling noise in the distance, and the sound of a bell.)

MYRTLE: There's the boat train.

(There is a terrific clatter as the express roars through the station.)

ALBERT: What about my other cup?—I shall have to be moving—the five forty-three will be in in a minute.

MYRTLE: Who's on the gate? *(She pours him out another cup.)*

ALBERT: Young William.

MYRTLE: You're neglecting your duty, you know—that's what you're doing.

ALBERT: A bit of relaxation never did anyone any harm—

(LAURA enters hurriedly, holding a handkerchief to her eye.)

LAURA: Please could you give me a glass of water? I've got something in my eye and I want to bathe it.

MYRTLE: Would you like me to have a look?

LAURA: Please don't trouble. I think the water will do it.

MYRTLE *(handing her a glass of water)*: Here.

(MYRTLE and ALBERT watch her in silence as she bathes her eye.)

ALBERT: Bit of coal dust, I expect.

MYRTLE: A man I knew lost the sight of one eye through get-

ting a bit of grit in it.

ALBERT: Nasty thing—very nasty.

MYRTLE (*as LAURA lifts her head*): Better?

LAURA (*obviously in pain*): I'm afraid not—Oh!

(ALEC rises from his table and comes over.)

ALEC: Can I help you?

LAURA: Oh, no, please—it's only something in my eye.

MYRTLE: Try pulling down your eyelid as far as it'll go.

ALBERT: And then blowing your nose.

ALEC: Please let me look. I happen to be a doctor.

LAURA: It's very kind of you.

ALEC: Turn round to the light, please—now—look up—now look down—I can see it. Keep still—(*He twists up the corner of his handkerchief and rapidly operates with it.*) There—

LAURA (*blinking*): Oh, dear—what a relief—it was agonizing.

ALEC: It looks like a bit of grit.

LAURA: It was when the express went through. Thank you very much indeed—

ALEC: Not at all.

(*There is the sound of a bell on the platform.*)

ALBERT (*gulping down his tea*): There we go—I must run.

LAURA: How lucky for me that you happened to be here.

ALEC: Anybody could have done it.

LAURA: Never mind, you did, and I'm most grateful. There's my train.—Good-bye.

(*She puts out her hand and ALEC shakes it politely. She goes out, followed at a run by ALBERT GODBY. ALEC looks after her for a moment and then goes back to his table. There is the noise of the train rumbling into the station as the lights fade.*)

SCENE II

The SCENE is the same and the time is about the same. Nearly three months have passed since the preceding scene, and it is now July.

MYRTLE is resplendent in a light overall; BERYL's appearance is unaltered. The tables are all unoccupied.

MYRTLE (*slightly relaxed in manner*): It's all very fane, I said, expecting me to do this, that and the other, but what do I get out of it? You can't expect me to be a cook, housekeeper, and char rolled into one during the day, and a loving wife in the evening, just because you feel like it.—Oh, dear, no. There are just as good fish in the sea, I said, as ever came out of it, and I packed my boxes then and there and left him.

BERYL: Didn't you ever go back?

MYRTLE: Never. I went to my sister's place at Folkestone for a bit, and then I went in with a friend of mine and we opened a tea shop in Hythe.

BERYL: And what happened to him?

MYRTLE: Dead as a doornail inside three years.

BERYL: Well, I never!

MYRTLE: So you see, every single thing she told me came true—first, them clubs coming together, an unexpected journey; then the Queen of Diamonds and the ten—that was my friend and the tea-shop business; then the Ace of Spades three times running—

(*STANLEY enters.*)

STANLEY: Two rock and an apple.

MYRTLE: What for?

STANLEY: Party on the up platform.

MYRTLE: Why can't they come in here for them?

STANLEY: Ask me another. *(He winks at BERYL.)*

MYRTLE: Got something in your eye?

STANLEY: Nothing beyond a bit of a twinkle every now and again.

BERYL *(giggling)*: Oh, you are awful!

MYRTLE: You learn to behave yourself, my lad. Here are your rock-cakes. Beryl, stop sniggering and give me an apple off the stand.

(BERYL complies.)

Not off the front, silly; haven't you got any sense?—Here—

(She takes one from the back of the stand so as to leave the symmetry undisturbed.)

STANLEY: This one's got a hole in it.

MYRTLE: Tell 'em to come and choose for themselves if they're particular—go on, now.

STANLEY: All right—give us a chance.

MYRTLE: What people want to eat on the platform for I really don't know. Tell Mr. Godby not to forget his tea.

STANLEY: Righto!

(He goes out as ALEC and LAURA come in. LAURA is wearing a summer dress, ALEC a grey flannel suit.)

ALEC: Tea or lemonade?

LAURA: Tea, I think—it's more refreshing, really. *(She sits at the table down L.)*

(ALEC goes to the counter.)

ALEC: Two teas, please.

MYRTLE: Cakes or pastry?

ALEC *(to LAURA)*: Cakes or pastry?

LAURA: No, thank you.

ALEC: Are those Bath buns fresh?

MYRTLE: Certainly they are—made this morning.

ALEC: Two, please.

(MYRTLE puts two Bath buns on a plate. Meanwhile BERYL has drawn two cups of tea.)

MYRTLE: That'll be eightpence.

ALEC: All right. *(He pays her.)*

MYRTLE: Take the tea to the table, Beryl.

ALEC: I'll carry the buns.

(BERYL brings the tea to the table. ALEC follows with the buns.)

You must eat one of these—fresh this morning.

LAURA: Very fattening.

ALEC: I don't hold with such foolishness.

(BERYL returns to the counter.)

MYRTLE: I'm going over my accounts. Let me know when Albert comes in.

BERYL: Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

(MYRTLE goes off R. BERYL settles down behind the counter with "Peg's Paper.")

LAURA: They do look good, I must say.

ALEC: One of my earliest passions—I've never outgrown it.



LAURA: Do you like milk in your tea?

ALEC: Yes, don't you?

LAURA: Yes—fortunately.

ALEC: Station refreshments are generally a wee bit arbitrary, you know.

LAURA: I wasn't grumbling.

ALEC (*smiling*): Do you ever grumble—are you ever sullen and cross and bad-tempered?

LAURA: Of course I am—at least, not sullen exactly—but I sometimes get into rages.

ALEC: I can't visualize you in a rage.

LAURA: I really don't see why you should.

ALEC: Oh, I don't know—there are signs, you know—one can usually tell—

LAURA: Long upper lips and jawlines and eyes close together?

ALEC: You haven't any of those things.

LAURA: Do you feel guilty at all? I do.

ALEC (*smiling*): Guilty?

LAURA: You ought to more than me, really—you neglected your work this afternoon.

ALEC: I worked this morning—a little relaxation never did anyone any harm. Why should either of us feel guilty?

LAURA: I don't know—a sort of instinct—as though we were letting something happen that oughtn't to happen.

ALEC: How awfully nice you are!

LAURA: When I was a child in Cornwall—we lived in Cornwall, you know—May, that's my sister, and I used to climb out of our bedroom window on summer nights and go down

to the cove and bathe. It was dreadfully cold, but we felt very adventurous. I'd never have dared do it by myself, but sharing the danger made it all right—that's how I feel now, really.

ALEC: Eat up your bun—it's awfully bad for you.

LAURA: You're laughing at me!

ALEC: Yes, a little, but I'm laughing at myself too.

LAURA: Why?

ALEC: For feeling a small pang when you said about being guilty.

LAURA: There you are, you see!

ALEC: We haven't done anything wrong.

LAURA: Of course we haven't.

ALEC: An accidental meeting—then another accidental meeting—then a little lunch—then the movies—what could be more ordinary? More natural?

LAURA: We're adults, after all.

ALEC: I never see myself as an adult, do you?

LAURA (*firmly*): Yes, I do. I'm a respectable married woman with a husband and a home and three children.

ALEC: But there must be a part of you, deep down inside, that doesn't feel like that at all—some little spirit that still wants to climb out of the window—that still longs to splash about a bit in the dangerous sea.

LAURA: Perhaps we none of us ever grow up entirely.

ALEC: How awfully nice you are!

LAURA: You said that before.

ALEC: I thought perhaps you hadn't heard.

LAURA: I heard all right.

ALEC (*gently*): I'm respectable too, you know. I have a home and a wife and children and responsibilities—I also have a lot of work to do and a lot of ideals all mixed up with it.

LAURA: What's she like?

ALEC: Madeleine?

LAURA: Yes.

ALEC: Small, dark, rather delicate—

LAURA: How funny! I should have thought she'd be fair.

ALEC: And your husband? What's he like?

LAURA: Medium height, brown hair, kindly, unemotional, and not delicate at all.

ALEC: You said that proudly.

LAURA: Did I? (*She looks down.*)

ALEC: What's the matter?

LAURA: The matter? What could be the matter?

ALEC: You suddenly went away.

LAURA (*brightly*): I thought perhaps we were being rather silly.

ALEC: Why?

LAURA: Oh, I don't know—we are such complete strangers, really.

ALEC: It's one thing to close a window, but quite another to slam it down on my fingers.

LAURA: I'm sorry.

ALEC: Please come back again.

LAURA: Is tea bad for one? Worse than coffee, I mean?

ALEC: If this is a professional interview, my fee is a guinea.

LAURA (*laughing*): It's nearly time for your train.

ALEC: I hate to think of it, chugging along, interrupting our tea party.

LAURA: I really am sorry now.

ALEC: What for?

LAURA: For being disagreeable.

ALEC: I don't think you could be disagreeable.

LAURA: You said something just now about your work and ideals being mixed up with it—what ideals?

ALEC: That's a long story.

LAURA: I suppose all doctors ought to have ideals, really—otherwise I should think the work would be unbearable.

ALEC: Surely you're not encouraging me to talk shop?

LAURA: Do you come here every Thursday?

ALEC: Yes. I come in from Churley, and spend a day in the hospital. Stephen Lynn graduated with me—he's the chief physician here. I take over from him once a week; it gives him a chance to go up to London and me a chance to observe and study the hospital patients.

LAURA: Is that a great advantage?

ALEC: Of course. You see, I have a special pigeon.

LAURA: What is it?

ALEC: Preventive medicine.

LAURA: Oh, I see.

ALEC (*laughing*): I'm afraid you don't.

LAURA: I was trying to be intelligent.

ALEC: Most good doctors, especially when they're young,

have private dreams—that's the best part of them; sometimes, though, those get over-professionalized and strangulated and—am I boring you?

LAURA: No—I don't quite understand—but you're not boring me.

ALEC: What I mean is this—all good doctors must be primarily enthusiasts. They must have, like writers and painters and priests, a sense of vocation—a deep-rooted, unsentimental desire to do good.

LAURA: Yes—I see that.

ALEC: Well, obviously one way of preventing disease is worth fifty ways of curing it—that's where my ideal comes in—preventive medicine isn't anything to do with medicine at all, really—it's concerned with conditions, living conditions and common sense and hygiene. For instance, my speciality is pneumoconiosis.

LAURA: Oh, dear!

ALEC: Don't be alarmed, it's simpler than it sounds—it's nothing but a slow process of fibrosis of the lung due to the inhalation of particles of dust. In the hospital here there are splendid opportunities for observing cures and making notes, because of the coal mines.

LAURA: You suddenly look much younger.

ALEC (*brought up short*): Do I?

LAURA: Almost like a little boy.

ALEC: What made you say that?

LAURA (*staring at him*): I don't know—yes, I do.

ALEC (*gently*): Tell me.

LAURA (*with panic in her voice*): Oh, no—I couldn't, really. You were saying about the coal mines—

ALEC (*looking into her eyes*): Yes—the inhalation of coal-dust—that's one specific form of the diseases—it's called anthracosis.

LAURA (*hypnotized*): What are the others?

ALEC: Chalicosis—that comes from metal dust—steelworks, you know—

LAURA: Yes, of course. Steelworks.

ALEC: And silicosis—stone dust—that's gold mines.

LAURA (*almost in a whisper*): I see.

(*There is the sound of a bell.*)

There's your train.

ALEC (*looking down*): Yes.

LAURA: You mustn't miss it.

ALEC: No.

LAURA (*again the panic in her voice*): What's the matter?

ALEC (*with an effort*): Nothing—nothing at all.

LAURA (*socially*): It's been so very nice—I've enjoyed my afternoon enormously.

ALEC: I'm so glad—so have I. I apologize for boring you with those long medical words—

LAURA: I feel dull and stupid, not to be able to understand more.

ALEC: Shall I see you again?

(*There is the sound of a train approaching.*)

LAURA: It's the other platform, isn't it? You'll have to run. Don't worry about me—mine's due in a few minutes.

ALEC: Shall I see you again?

LAURA: Of course—perhaps you could come over to Ketchworth one Sunday. It's rather far, I know, but we should be delighted to see you.



ALEC (*intensely*): Please—please—

(*The train is heard drawing to a standstill.*)

LAURA: What is it?

ALEC: Next Thursday—the same time—

LAURA: No—I can't possibly—I—

ALEC: Please—I ask you most humbly—

LAURA: You'll miss your train!

ALEC: All right. (*He gets up.*)

LAURA: Run—

ALEC (*taking her hand*): Good-bye.

LAURA (*breathlessly*): I'll be there.

ALEC: Thank you, my dear.

(*He goes out at a run, colliding with ALBERT GODBY, who is on his way in.*)

ALBERT: 'Ere—'ere—take it easy now—take it easy— (*He goes over to the counter.*)

(*LAURA sits quite still, staring in front of her as the lights fade.*)

SCENE III

It is now October. Three months have passed since the preceding scene.

The refreshment room is empty except for MYRTLE, who is bending down putting coal into the stove.

ALBERT GODBY *enters*. Upon perceiving her slightly vulnerable position, he slaps her lightly on the behind—she springs to her feet.

MYRTLE: Albert Godby, how dare you!

ALBERT: I couldn't resist it.

MYRTLE: I'll trouble you to keep your hands to yourself.

ALBERT: You're blushing—you look wonderful when you're angry, like an avenging angel.

MYRTLE: I'll give you avenging angel—coming in here taking liberties—

ALBERT: I didn't think after what you said last Monday you'd object to a friendly little slap.

MYRTLE: Never you mind about last Monday—I'm on duty now. A nice thing if Mr. Saunders had happened to be looking through the window.

ALBERT: If Mr. Saunders is in the 'abit of looking through windows, it's time he saw something worth looking at.

MYRTLE: You ought to be ashamed of yourself!

ALBERT: It's just high spirits—don't be mad at me.

MYRTLE: High spirits indeed!

ALBERT (*singing*): I'm twenty-one today—I'm twenty-one today. I've got the key of the parlour door—I've never been twenty-one before—

MYRTLE (*retiring behind the counter*): Don't make such a noise—they'll hear you on the platform.

ALBERT (*singing*): Picture you upon my knee, and tea for two and two for tea.

MYRTLE: Now look here, Albert Godby—once and for all, will you behave yourself!

ALBERT (*singing*): Sometimes I'm 'appy—sometimes I'm blue-oo— (*He breaks off.*) This is one of my 'appy moments—

MYRTLE: Here, take your tea and be quiet.

ALBERT: It's all your fault, anyway.

MYRTLE: I don't know to what you're referring, I'm sure.

ALBERT: I was thinking of tonight—

MYRTLE: If you don't learn to behave yourself there won't be a tonight—or any other night, either—

ALBERT (*singing*): I'm in love again and the spring is coming. I'm in love again, hear my heart-strings humming—

MYRTLE: Will you hold your noise?

ALBERT: Give us a kiss.

MYRTLE: I'll do no such thing.

ALBERT: Just a quick one—across the counter. (*He grabs her arm across the counter.*)

MYRTLE: Albert, stop it!

ALBERT: Come on—there's a love.

MYRTLE: Let go of me this minute.

ALBERT: Come on, just one.

(*They scuffle for a moment, upsetting a neat pile of cakes onto the floor.*)

MYRTLE: Now look at me Banburys—all over the floor.

(*ALBERT bends down to pick them up. STANLEY enters.*)

STANLEY: Just in time—or born in the vestry.

MYRTLE: You shut your mouth and help Mr. Godby pick up them cakes.

STANLEY: Anything to oblige. (*He helps ALBERT.*)

(*ALEC and LAURA come in. LAURA goes to their usual table. ALEC goes to the counter.*)

ALEC: Good afternoon.

MYRTLE (*grandly*): Good afternoon.

ALEC: Two teas, please.

MYRTLE: Cake or pastry?

ALEC: No, thank you—just the tea.

ALBERT (*conversationally*): Nice weather.

ALEC: Very nice.

ALBERT: Bit of a nip in the air, though.

(*MYRTLE, having given ALEC two cups of tea and taken the money for it, turns to STANLEY.*)

MYRTLE: What are you standing there gaping at?

STANLEY: Where's Beryl?

MYRTLE: Never you mind about Beryl; you ought to be on Number Four, and well you know it.

ALBERT (*reflectively*): Love's young dream!

(*ALEC, meanwhile, has carried the two cups of tea over to the table and sat down.*)

STANLEY: There's been a run on the Cadbury's nut milk this afternoon! I shall need some more.

MYRTLE (*looking at his tray*): How many have you got left?

STANLEY: Only three.

MYRTLE: Take six more then, and don't forget to mark 'em down.

STANLEY: Righto.

(*STANLEY goes behind the counter and collects six packets of chocolate, then he goes out whistling.*)

ALEC: I didn't mean to be unkind.

LAURA: It doesn't matter.

(A YOUNG MAN comes in and goes to the counter.)

YOUNG MAN: Cup of coffee, please, and a beef sandwich.

MYRTLE: We're out of beef—will ham do?

YOUNG MAN: Yes—ham'll do.

(ALBERT winks at MYRTLE over his teacup. MYRTLE draws a cup of coffee for the YOUNG MAN and takes a sandwich out of one of the glass stands.)

ALEC: We can't part like this.

LAURA: I think it would be better if we did.

ALEC: You don't really mean that?

LAURA: I'm trying to mean it—I'm trying with all my strength.

ALEC: Oh, my dearest dear—

LAURA: Don't—please don't—

MYRTLE *(to the YOUNG MAN)*: Fourpence, please.

YOUNG MAN: Thank you. *(He pays and carries his coffee and sandwich over to the table near the stove.)*

ALBERT: It is all right about tonight, isn't it?

MYRTLE: I'll think about it.

ALBERT: It's Claudette Colbert, you know.

MYRTLE: Fat chance I shall get of enjoying Claudette Colbert with you hissing in me ear all the time.

ALBERT: I'll be as good as gold.

(BERYL enters L. in a coat and hat—she goes behind the counter.)

ALEC: It's no use running away from the truth, darling—we're lovers, aren't we? If it happens or if it doesn't, we're lovers in

our hearts.

LAURA: Can't you see how wrong it is? How dreadfully wrong!

ALEC: I can see what's true—whether it's wrong or right.

BERYL *(taking off her hat and coat)*: Mr. Saunders wants you, Mr. Godby.

ALBERT: What for?

BERYL: I don't know.

MYRTLE: You'd better go, Albert; you know what he is.

ALBERT: I know 'e's a bloody fool, if that's what you mean.

MYRTLE: Be quiet, Albert—in front of Beryl.

BERYL: Don't mind me.

MYRTLE: Go on—finish up your tea.

ALBERT: No peace for the wicked—

MYRTLE: Go on—

ALBERT: I'll be back—

MYRTLE: That'll be nice, I'm sure—

(ALBERT goes.)

(MYRTLE retires to the upper end of the counter. BERYL goes off and comes on again laden with various packages of comestibles. She and MYRTLE proceed to stack them on the upstage end of the counter.)

ALEC *(urgently)*: There's no chance of Stephen getting back until late—nobody need ever know.

LAURA: It's so furtive to love like that—so cheap—much better not to love at all.

ALEC: It's too late not to love at all—be brave—we're both in

the same boat—let's be generous to each other.

LAURA: What is there brave in it—sneaking away to someone else's house, loving in secret with the horror of being found out hanging over us all the time. It would be far braver to say good-bye and never see each other again.

ALEC: Could you be as brave as that? I know I couldn't.

LAURA (*breathlessly*): Couldn't you?

ALEC: Listen, my dear. This is something that's never happened to either of us before. We've loved before and been happy before, and miserable and contented and restless, but this is different—something lovely and strange and desperately difficult. We can't measure it along with the values of our ordinary lives.

LAURA: Why should it be so important—why should we let it be so important?

ALEC: We can't help ourselves.

LAURA: We can—we can if only we're strong enough.

ALEC: Why is it so strong to deny something that's urgent and real—something that all our instincts are straining after—mightn't it be weak and not strong at all to run away from such tremendous longing?

LAURA: Is it so real to you? So tremendous?

ALEC: Can't you see that it is?

LAURA: It's so difficult, so strained. I'm lost.

ALEC: Don't say that, darling.

LAURA: Loving you is hard for me—it makes me a stranger in my own house. Familiar things, ordinary things that I've known for years, like the dining-room curtains, and the wooden tub with a silver top that holds biscuits, and a water-colour of San Remo that my mother painted, look odd to me, as though they belonged to someone else—when I've just left you, when I go home, I'm more lonely than I've ever been before. I passed the house the other day without noticing and

had to turn back, and when I went in it seemed to draw away from me—my whole life seems to be drawing away from me, and—and I don't know what to do.

ALEC: Oh, darling—

LAURA: I love them just the same, Fred I mean and the children, but it's as though it wasn't me at all—as though I were looking on at someone else. Do you know what I mean? Is it the same with you? Or is it easier for men—

ALEC: I don't know.

LAURA: Please, dear, don't look unhappy. I'm not grumbling, really I'm not—

ALEC: I don't suppose being in love has ever been easy for anybody.

LAURA (*reaching for his hand*): We've only got a few more minutes—I didn't mean to be depressing.

ALEC: It isn't any easier for me, darling, honestly it isn't.

LAURA: I know, I know—I only wanted reassuring.

ALEC: I hold you in my arms all the way back in the train—I'm angry with every moment that I'm not alone—to love you uninterrupted—whenever my surgery door opens and a patient comes in, my heart jumps in case it might be you. One of them I'm grateful to—he's got neuritis, and I give him sun-ray treatment—he lies quite quietly baking, and I can be with you in the shadows behind the lamp.

LAURA: How silly we are—how unbearably silly!

ALEC: Friday—Saturday—Sunday—Monday—Tuesday—Wednesday—

LAURA: Thursday—

ALEC: It's all right, isn't it?

LAURA: Oh, yes—of course it is.

ALEC: Don't pass the house again—don't let it snub you. Go



boldly in and stare that damned water-colour out of countenance.

LAURA: All right—don't bake your poor neuritis man too long—you might blister him.

(The continuation of their scene is drowned by the noisy entrance of two soldiers, BILL and JOHNNIE. They go to the counter.)

BILL: Afternoon, lady.

MYRTLE (*grandly*): Good afternoon.

BILL: A couple of splashes, please.

MYRTLE: Very sorry, it's out of hours.

JOHNNIE: Come on, lady—you've got a kind face.

MYRTLE: That's neither here nor there.

BILL: Just sneak us a couple under cover of them poor old sandwiches.

MYRTLE: Them sandwiches were fresh this morning, and I shall do no such thing.

BILL: Come on, be a sport.

JOHNNIE: Nobody'd know.

MYRTLE: I'm very sorry, I'm sure, but it's against the rules.

BILL: You could pop it into a couple of teacups.

MYRTLE: You're asking me to break the law, young man.

JOHNNIE: I think I've got a cold coming on—we've been mucking about at the Butts all day—you can't afford to let the army catch cold, you know.

MYRTLE: You can have as much as you want after six o'clock.

BILL: An 'eart of stone—that's what you've got, lady—an 'eart of stone.

MYRTLE: Don't you be cheeky.

JOHNNIE: My throat's like a parrot's cage—listen! (*He makes a crackling noise with his throat.*)

MYRTLE: Take some lemonade, then—or ginger-beer.

BILL: Couldn't touch it—against doctor's orders—my inside's been more peculiar ever since I 'ad trench feet—you wouldn't give a child carbolic acid, would you? That's what ginger-beer does to me.

MYRTLE: Get on with you!

JOHNNIE: It's true—it's poison to him, makes 'im make the most 'orrible noises—you wouldn't like anything nasty to 'appen in your posh buffay—

MYRTLE: May license does not permit me to serve alcohol out of hours—that's final!

JOHNNIE: We're soldiers, we are—willing to lay down our lives for you—and you grudge us one splash—

MYRTLE: You wouldn't want to get me into trouble, would you?

BILL: Give us a chance, lady, that's all—just give us a chance.

(They both roar with laughter.)

MYRTLE: Beryl, ask Mr. Godby to come 'ere for a moment, will you?

BERYL: Yes, Mrs. Bagot. (*She comes out from behind the counter and goes onto the platform.*)

BILL: Who's 'e when 'e's at home?

MYRTLE: You'll soon see—coming in here cheeking me.

JOHNNIE: Now then, now then—naughty naughty—

MYRTLE: Kaindly be quiet!

BILL: Shut up, Johnnie—

JOHNNIE: What about them drinks, lady?

MYRTLE: I've already told you I can't serve alcoholic refreshment out of hours—

JOHNNIE: Come off it, mother, be a pal!

MYRTLE (*losing her temper*): I'll give you mother, you saucy upstart—

BILL: Who are you calling an upstart!

MYRTLE: You—and I'll trouble you to get out of here double quick—disturbing the customers and making a nuisance of yourselves.

JOHNNIE: 'Ere, where's the fire—where's the fire!

(ALBERT GODBY *enters, followed by* BERYL.)

ALBERT: What's going on in 'ere!

MYRTLE (*with dignity*): Mr. Godby, these gentlemen are annoying me.

BILL: We 'aven't done anything.

JOHNNIE: All we did was ask for a couple of drinks—

MYRTLE: They insulted me, Mr. Godby.

JOHNNIE: We never did nothing of the sort—just 'aving a little joke, that's all.

ALBERT (*laconically*): 'Op it—both of you.

BILL: We've got a right to stay 'ere as long as we like.

ALBERT: You 'eard what I said—'op it!

JOHNNIE: What is this, a free country or a bloody Sunday school?

ALBERT (*firmly*): I checked your passes at the gate—your train's due in a minute—Number Two platform—'op it.

JOHNNIE: Look 'ere, now—

BILL: Come on, Johnnie—don't argue with the poor little basket.

ALBERT (*dangerously*): 'Op it!

(BILL and JOHNNIE *go to the door*—JOHNNIE *turns*.)

JOHNNIE: Toodle-oo, mother, and if them sandwiches were made this morning, you're Shirley Temple—

(*They go out*.)

MYRTLE: Thank you, Albert.

BERYL: What a nerve, talking to you like that!

MYRTLE: Be quiet, Beryl—pour me out a nip of Three Star—I'm feeling quite upset.

ALBERT: I've got to get back to the gate.

MYRTLE (*graciously*): I'll be seeing you later, Albert.

ALBERT (*with a wink*): OK!

(*He goes out*.)

(*A train bell rings. BERYL brings MYRTLE a glass of brandy*.)

MYRTLE (*sipping it*): I'll say one thing for Albert Godby—he may be on the small side, but 'e's a gentleman.

(*She and BERYL retire once more to the upper end of the counter and continue their arrangement of bottles, biscuits, etc. There is the sound of a train drawing into the station*.)

LAURA: There's your train.

ALEC: I'm going to miss it.

LAURA: Please go.

ALEC: No.

LAURA (*clasping and unclasping her hands*): I wish I could think clearly. I wish I could know—really know what to do.

ALEC: Do you trust me?

LAURA: Yes—I trust you.

ALEC: I don't mean conventionally—I mean really.

LAURA: Yes.

ALEC: Everything's against us—all the circumstances of our lives—those have got to go on unaltered. We're nice people, you and I, and we've got to go on being nice. Let's enclose this love of ours with real strength, and let that strength be that no one is hurt by it except ourselves.

LAURA: Must we be hurt by it?

ALEC: Yes—when the time comes.

LAURA: Very well.

ALEC: All the furtiveness and the secrecy and the hole-in-corner cheapness can be justified if only we're strong enough—strong enough to keep it to ourselves, clean and untouched by anybody else's knowledge or even suspicions—something of our own forever—to be remembered—

LAURA: Very well.

ALEC: We won't speak of it any more—I'm going now—back to Stephen's flat. I'll wait for you—if you don't come I shall know only that you weren't quite ready—that you needed a little longer to find your own dear heart. This is the address.

(He scribbles on a bit of paper as the express thunders through the station. He gets up and goes swiftly without looking at her again. She sits staring at the paper, then she fumbles in her bag and finds a cigarette. She lights it—the platform bell goes.)

MYRTLE: There's the five forty-three.

BERYL: We ought to have another Huntley and Palmer's to put in the middle, really.

MYRTLE: There are some more on the shelf.

(BERYL fetches another packet of biscuits and takes it to MYRTLE. There is the noise of the 5.43—LAURA's train—steaming into the station. LAURA sits puffing her cigarette. Suddenly she gets up—gathers up her bag quickly, and moves toward the door. She pauses and comes back to the table as the whistle blows. The train starts, she puts the paper in her bag and goes quietly out as the lights fade.)

SCENE IV

The time is about 9.45 p.m. on an evening in December. There are only two lights on in the refreshment room as it is nearly closing time.

When the SCENE starts the stage is empty. There is the noise of a fast train rattling through the station.

BERYL comes in from the upstage door behind the counter armed with several muslin cloths, which she proceeds to drape over the things on the counter. She hums breathily to herself as she does so. STANLEY enters. He has discarded his uniform and is wearing his ordinary clothes.

STANLEY: Hallo!

BERYL: You made me jump.

STANLEY: Are you walking home?

BERYL: Maybe.

STANLEY: Do you want me to wait?

BERYL: I've got to go straight back.

STANLEY: Why?

BERYL: Mother'll be waiting up.

STANLEY: Can't you say you've been kept late?

BERYL: I said that last time.

STANLEY: Say it again—say there's been a rush on.

BERYL: Don't be so silly—Mother's not that much of a fool.

STANLEY: Be a sport, Beryl—shut down five minutes early and say you was kept ten minutes late—that gives us a quarter of an hour.

BERYL: What happens if Mrs. Bagot comes back?

STANLEY: She won't—she's out having a bit of a slap and tickle with our Albert.

BERYL: Stan, you are awful!

STANLEY: I'll wait for you in the yard.

BERYL: Oh, all right.

(STANLEY goes out.)

(BERYL resumes her song and the draping of the cake-stands. LAURA enters—she looks pale and unhappy.)

LAURA: I'd like a glass of brandy, please.

BERYL: We're just closing.

LAURA: I see you are, but you're not quite closed yet, are you?

BERYL (*sullenly*): Three star?

LAURA: Yes, that'll do.

BERYL (*getting it*): Tenpence, please.

LAURA (*taking money from her bag*): Here—and—have you a piece of paper and an envelope?

BERYL: I'm afraid you'll have to get that at the bookstall.

LAURA: The bookstall's shut—please—it's very important—I should be so much obliged—

BERYL: Oh, all right—wait a minute.

(*She goes off. LAURA sips the brandy at the counter; she is obviously trying to control her nerves. BERYL returns with some notepaper and an envelope.*)

LAURA: Thank you so much.

BERYL: We close in a few minutes, you know.

LAURA: Yes, I know.

(*She takes the notepaper and her brandy over to the table below the door and sits down. She stares at the paper for a moment, takes another sip of brandy, and then begins to write. BERYL looks at her with exasperation and goes off through the upstage door R. LAURA falters in her writing, then breaks down and buries her face in her hands. ALEC comes in—he looks hopelessly round for a moment, and then sees her.*)

ALEC: Thank God—oh, darling!

LAURA: Please go away—please don't say anything.

ALEC: I can't leave you like this.

LAURA: You must. It'll be better—really it will.

ALEC (*sitting down beside her*): You're being dreadfully cruel.

LAURA: I feel so utterly degraded.

ALEC: It was just a beastly accident that he came back early—he doesn't know who you are—he never even saw you.

LAURA: I listened to your voices in the sitting room—I crept out and down the stairs—feeling like a prostitute.

ALEC: Don't, dearest—don't talk like that, please—

LAURA (*bitterly*): I suppose he laughed, didn't he—after he got over being annoyed? I suppose you spoke of me together as men of the world.

ALEC: We didn't speak of you—we spoke of a nameless creature who had no reality at all.

LAURA (*wildly*): Why didn't you tell him the truth? Why

didn't you say who I was and that we were lovers—shameful secret lovers—using his flat like a bad house because we had nowhere else to go, and were afraid of being found out! Why didn't you tell him we were cheap and low and without courage—why didn't you—?

ALEC: Stop it, Laura—pull yourself together!

LAURA: It's true—don't you see, it's true!

ALEC: It's nothing of the sort. I know you feel horrible, and I'm deeply, desperately sorry. I feel horrible, too, but it doesn't matter really—this—this unfortunate, damnable incident—it was just bad luck. It couldn't affect us really, you and me—we know the truth—we know we really love each other—*that's* all that matters.

LAURA: It isn't all that matters—other things matter too, self-respect matters, and decency—I can't go on any longer.

ALEC: Could you really—say good-bye—not see me anymore?

LAURA: Yes—if you'd help me.

(There is silence for a moment. ALEC gets up and walks about—he stops and stands staring at a coloured calendar on the wall.)

ALEC *(quietly, with his back to her)*: I love you, Laura—I shall love you always until the end of my life—all the shame that the world might force on us couldn't touch the real truth of it. I can't look at you now because I know something—I know that this is the beginning of the end—not the end of my loving you—but the end of our being together. But not quite yet, darling—please not quite yet.

LAURA: Very well—not quite yet.

ALEC: I know what you feel—about this evening, I mean—about the beastliness of it. I know about the strain of our different lives, our lives apart from each other. The feeling of guilt—of doing wrong is a little too strong, isn't it? Too persistent—perhaps too great a price to pay for the few hours of happiness we get out of it. I know all this because it's the same for me too.

LAURA: You can look at me now—I'm all right.

ALEC *(turning)*: Let's be careful—let's prepare ourselves—a sudden break now, however brave and admirable, would be too cruel—we can't do such violence to our hearts and minds.

LAURA: Very well.

ALEC: I'm going away.

LAURA: I see.

ALEC: But not quite yet.

LAURA: Please not quite yet.

(BERYL enters in hat and coat.)

BERYL: I'm afraid it's closing time.

ALEC: Oh, is it?

BERYL: I shall have to lock up.

ALEC: This lady is catching the ten-ten—she's not feeling very well, and it's very cold on the platform.

BERYL: The waiting-room's open.

ALEC *(going to the counter)*: Look here—I'd be very much obliged if you'd let us stay here for another few minutes.

BERYL: I'm sorry—it's against the rules.

ALEC *(giving her a ten-shilling note)*: Please—come back to lock up when the train comes in.

BERYL: I'll have to switch off the lights—someone might see 'em on and think we were open.

ALEC: Just for a few minutes—please!

BERYL: You won't touch anything, will you?

ALEC: Not a thing.

BERYL: Oh, all right.



(She switches off the lights. The lamp from the platform shines in through the window so it isn't quite dark.)

ALEC: Thank you very much.

(BERYL goes out by the platform door, closing it behind her.)

LAURA: Just a few minutes.

ALEC: Let's have a cigarette, shall we?

LAURA: I have some. *(She takes her bag up from the table.)*

ALEC *(producing his case)*: No, here. *(He lights their cigarettes carefully.)* Now then—I want you to promise me something.

LAURA: What is it?

ALEC: Promise me that however unhappy you are, and however much you think things over, that you'll meet me next Thursday as usual.

LAURA: Not at the flat.

ALEC: No—be at the Picture House Café at the same time. I'll hire a car—we'll drive out into the country.

LAURA: All right—I promise.

ALEC: We've got to talk—I've got to explain.

LAURA: About going away?

ALEC: Yes.

LAURA: Where are you going? Where *can* you go? You *can't* give up your practice!

ALEC: I've had a job offered me—I wasn't going to tell you—I wasn't going to take it—I know now, it's the only way out.

LAURA: Where?

ALEC: A long way away—Johannesburg.

LAURA *(hopelessly)*: Oh, God!

ALEC *(hurriedly)*: My brother's out there—they're opening a new hospital—they want me in it. It's a fine opportunity, really. I'll take Madeleine and the boys, it's been torturing me for three weeks, the necessity of making a decision one way or the other—I haven't told anybody, not even Madeleine. I couldn't bear the idea of leaving you, but now I see—it's got to happen soon, anyway—it's almost happening already.

LAURA *(tonelessly)*: When will you go?

ALEC: In about two months' time.

LAURA: It's quite near, isn't it?

ALEC: Do you want me to stay? Do you want me to turn down the offer?

LAURA: Don't be foolish, Alec.

ALEC: I'll do whatever you say.

LAURA: That's unkind of you, my darling. *(She suddenly buries her head in her arms and bursts into tears.)*

ALEC *(putting his arms round her)*: Oh, Laura, don't, please don't!

LAURA: I'll be all right—leave me alone a minute.

ALEC: I love you—I love you.

LAURA: I know.

ALEC: We knew we'd get hurt.

LAURA *(sitting up)*: I'm being very stupid.

ALEC *(giving her his handkerchief)*: Here.

LAURA *(blowing her nose)*: Thank you.

(The platform bell goes.)

There's my train.

ALEC: You're not angry with me, are you?

LAURA: No, I'm not angry—I don't think I'm anything, really—I feel just tired.

ALEC: Forgive me.

LAURA: Forgive you for what?

ALEC: For everything—for having met you in the first place—for taking the piece of grit out of your eye—for loving you—for bringing you so much misery.

LAURA (*trying to smile*): I'll forgive you—if you'll forgive me—

(*There is the noise of a train pulling into the station. BERYL enters. LAURA and ALEC get up.*)

ALEC: I'll see you into the train.

LAURA: No—please stay here.

(*She rises and goes to ALEC and embraces him.*)

ALEC: All right.

LAURA (*softly*): Good night, darling.

(*She goes hurriedly out onto the platform without looking back.*)

ALEC: The last train for Churley hasn't gone yet, has it?

BERYL: I couldn't say, I'm sure. I must lock up now.

ALEC: All right. I'll wait in the waiting-room—thank you very much. Good night.

BERYL: Good night.

(*The train starts as he goes out onto the platform. BERYL locks the door carefully after him, and then goes off upstage R. as the lights fade.*)

SCENE V

The time is between 5 and 5.30 on an afternoon in March.

MYRTLE *is behind the counter. BERYL is crouching over the stove putting coals in it. ALBERT enters.*

ALBERT (*gaily*): One tea, please—two lumps of sugar, and a Bath bun, and make it snappy.

MYRTLE: What's the matter with you?

ALBERT: Beryl, 'op it.

MYRTLE: Don't you go ordering Beryl about—you haven't any right to.

ALBERT: You heard me, Beryl—'op it.

BERYL (*giggling*): Well, I never!

MYRTLE: Go into the back room a minute, Beryl.

BERYL: Yes, Mrs. Bagot.

(*She goes.*)

MYRTLE: Now then, Albert—you behave—we don't want the whole station laughing at us.

ALBERT: What is there to laugh at?

MYRTLE: Here's your tea.

ALBERT: How d'you feel?

MYRTLE: Don't talk so soft—how should I feel?

ALBERT: I only wondered—(*He leans toward her.*)

MYRTLE: Look out—somebody's coming in.

ALBERT: It's only Romeo and Juliet.

(*LAURA and ALEC come in. LAURA goes to the same table, ALEC to the counter.*)

ALEC: Good afternoon.

MYRTLE: Good afternoon—same as usual?



ALEC: Yes, please.

MYRTLE (*drawing tea*): Quite springy out, isn't it?

ALEC: Yes—quite.

(*He pays her, collects the tea, and carries it over to the table—something in his manner causes ALBERT to make a grimace over his teacup at MYRTLE. ALEC sits down at the table, and he and LAURA sip their tea in silence.*)

ALBERT: I spoke to Mr. Saunders.

MYRTLE: What did he say?

ALBERT: 'E was very decent, as a matter-of-fact—said it'd be all right—

(*MILDRED comes in hurriedly. She is a fair girl wearing a station overall.*)

MILDRED: Is Beryl here?

MYRTLE: Why, Mildred, whatever's the matter?

MILDRED: It's her mother—she's bad again—they telephoned through to the booking office.

MYRTLE: She's inside—you'd better go in. Don't go yelling it at her, now—tell her gently.

MILDRED: They said she'd better come at once.

MYRTLE: I thought this was going to happen—stay here, Mildred. I'll tell her. Wait a minute, Albert.

(*MYRTLE vanishes into the inside room.*)

ALBERT: Better get back to the bookstall, hadn't you?

MILDRED: Do you think she's going to die?

ALBERT: How do I know?

MILDRED: Mr. Saunders thinks she is—judging by what the doctor said on the telephone.

ALBERT: 'Ow do you know it was the doctor?

MILDRED: Mr. Saunders said it was.

ALBERT: She's always being took bad, that old woman.

MILDRED: Do you think Beryl would like me to go along with her?

ALBERT: You can't, and leave nobody on the papers.

MILDRED: Mr. Saunders said I might if it was necessary.

ALBERT: Well, go and get your 'at then, and don't make such a fuss.

(*MYRTLE comes back.*)

MYRTLE: She's going at once, poor little thing!

ALBERT: Mildred's going with her.

MYRTLE: All right, Mildred—go on.

MILDRED (*halfway to the door*): What about me 'at?

MYRTLE: Never mind about your 'at—go this way.

(*MILDRED rushes off up stage R.*)

Poor child—this has been hanging over her for weeks. (*She puts her head round the door.*) Mildred, tell Beryl she needn't come back tonight, I'll stay on.

ALBERT: 'Ere, you can't do that, we was going to the Broadway Melody of Nineteen Thirty-six.

MYRTLE: For shame, Albert—thinking of the Broadway Melody of Nineteen Thirty-six in a moment of life and death!

ALBERT: But look 'ere, Myrtle—

MYRTLE: I dreamt of a hearse last night, and whenever I dream of a hearse something happens—you mark my words—

ALBERT: I've got reserved tickets—

MYRTLE: Send Stanley to change them on his way home. Come in 'ere when you go off and I'll make you a little supper inside.

ALBERT (*grumbily*): Everybody getting into a state and fussing about—

MYRTLE: You shock me, Albert, you do really—go on, finish up your tea and get back to the gate.

(*She turns and goes to the upper end of the counter. ALBERT gulps his tea.*)

ALBERT (*slamming the cup down on the counter*): Women!

(*He stomps out onto the platform.*)

ALEC: Are you all right, darling?

LAURA: Yes, I'm all right.

ALEC: I wish I could think of something to say.

LAURA: It doesn't matter—not saying anything, I mean.

ALEC: I'll miss my train and wait to see you into yours.

LAURA: No—no—please don't. I'll come over to your platform with you—I'd rather.

ALEC: Very well.

LAURA: Do you think we shall ever see each other again?

ALEC: I don't know. (*His voice breaks.*) Not for years, anyway.

LAURA: The children will all be grown up—I wonder if they'll ever meet and know each other.

ALEC: Couldn't I write to you—just once in a while?

LAURA: No—please not—we promised we wouldn't.

ALEC: Please know this—please know that you'll be with me

for ages and ages yet—far away into the future. Time will wear down the agony of not seeing you, bit by bit the pain will go—but the loving you and the memory of you won't ever go—please know that.

LAURA: I know it.

ALEC: It's easier for me than for you. I do realize that, really I do. I at least will have different shapes to look at, and new work to do—you have to go on among familiar things—my heart aches for you so.

LAURA: I'll be all right.

ALEC: I love you with all my heart and soul.

LAURA (*quietly*): I want to die—if only I could die.

ALEC: If you died you'd forget me—I want to be remembered.

LAURA: Yes, I know—I do too.

ALEC: Good-bye, my dearest love.

LAURA: Good-bye, my dearest love.

ALEC: We've still got a few minutes.

LAURA: Thank God—!

(*DOLLY MESSITER bustles into the refreshment room. She is a nicely dressed woman, with rather a fussy manner. She is laden with parcels. She sees LAURA.*)

DOLLY: Laura! What a lovely surprise!

LAURA (*dazed*): Oh, Dolly!

DOLLY: My dear, I've been shopping till I'm dropping! My feet are nearly falling off, and my throat's parched. I thought of having tea in Spindle's, but I was terrified of losing the train. I'm always missing trains, and being late for meals, and Bob gets disagreeable for days at a time. Oh, dear—(*She flops down at their table.*)

LAURA: This is Doctor Harvey.

ALEC (*rising*): How do you do!

DOLLY (*shaking hands*): How do you do! Would you be a perfect dear and get me a cup of tea! I don't think I could drag my poor old bones as far as the counter. I must get some chocolates for Tony, too, but I can do that afterwards. (*She offers him money.*)

ALEC (*waving it away*): No, please—

(*He goes drearily over to the counter, gets another cup of tea from MYRTLE, pays for it, and comes back to the table. Meanwhile DOLLY continues to talk.*)

DOLLY: My dear—what a nice-looking man. Who on earth is he? Really, you're quite a dark horse. I shall telephone Fred in the morning and make mischief—that is a bit of luck. I haven't seen you for ages, and I've been meaning to pop in, but Tony's had measles, you know, and I had all that awful fuss about Phyllis—but of course you don't know—she left me!

LAURA (*with an effort*): Oh, how dreadful!

DOLLY: Mind you, I never cared for her much, but still Tony did. Tony adored her, and—but, never mind, I'll tell you all about that in the train.

(*ALEC arrives back at the table with her tea—he sits down again.*)

Thank you so very much. They've certainly put enough milk in it—but still, it'll be refreshing. (*She sips it.*) Oh, dear—no sugar.

ALEC: It's in the spoon.

DOLLY: Oh, of course—what a fool I am—Laura, you look frightfully well. I do wish I'd known you were coming in today, we could have come together and lunched and had a good gossip. I loathe shopping by myself, anyway.

(*There is the sound of a bell on the platform.*)

LAURA: There's your train.

ALEC: Yes, I know.

DOLLY: Aren't you coming with us?

ALEC: No, I go in the opposite direction. My practice is in Churley.

DOLLY: Oh, I see.

ALEC: I'm a general practitioner at the moment.

LAURA (*dully*): Doctor Harvey is going out to Africa next week.

DOLLY: Oh! How thrilling.

(*There is the sound of ALEC's train approaching.*)

ALEC: I must go.

LAURA: Yes, you must.

ALEC: Good-bye.

DOLLY: Good-bye.

(*He shakes hands with DOLLY, looks at LAURA swiftly once, then presses her hand under cover of the table and leaves hurriedly as the train is heard rumbling into the station. LAURA sits quite still.*)

He'll have to run—he's got to get right over to the other platform. How did you meet him?

LAURA: I got something in my eye one day, and he took it out.

DOLLY: My dear—how very romantic! I'm always getting things in my eye and nobody the least bit attractive has ever paid the faintest attention—which reminds me—you know about Harry and Lucy Jenner, don't you?

LAURA (*listening for the train to start*): No—what about them?

DOLLY: My dear—they're going to get a divorce—at least, I believe they're getting a conjugal separation, or whatever it is, to begin with, and the divorce later on.

(*The train starts, and the sound of it gradually dies away in the distance.*)

It seems that there's an awful Mrs. Something or other in London that he's been carrying on with for ages—you know how he was always having to go up on business. Well, apparently Lucy's sister saw them, Harry and this woman, in the Tate Gallery of all places, and she wrote to Lucy, and then gradually the whole thing came out. Of course, it was all most disgraceful. To begin with, I think it was a dirty trick to make such a fuss openly—it might have been smoothed over perfectly easily and no one would have known anything about it.

(There is the sound of a bell on the platform.)

Is that our train? *(She addresses MYRTLE.)* Can you tell me, is that the Ketchworth train?

MYRTLE: No, that's the express.

LAURA: The boat train.

DOLLY: Oh, yes—that doesn't stop, does it? Express trains are Tony's passion in life—he knows them all by name—where they start from and where they go to, and how long they take to get there. Oh, dear, I mustn't forget his chocolate.

(She jumps up and goes to the counter. LAURA remains quite still.)

(At the counter.) I want some chocolate, please.

MYRTLE: Milk or plain?

DOLLY: Plain, I think—or no, perhaps milk would be nicer. Have you any with nuts in it?

(The express is heard in the distance.)

MYRTLE: Nestlé's nut-milk—shilling or sixpence?

DOLLY: Give me one plain and one nut-milk.

(The noise of the express sounds louder—LAURA suddenly gets up and goes swiftly out onto the platform. The express roars through the station as DOLLY finishes buying and paying for her chocolate. She turns.)

Oh! Where is she?

MYRTLE *(looking over the counter)*: I never noticed her go.

(DOLLY comes over to the table. LAURA comes in again, looking very white and shaky.)

DOLLY: My dear, I couldn't think where you'd disappeared to.

LAURA: I just wanted to see the express go through.

DOLLY: What on earth's the matter—do you feel ill?

LAURA: I feel a little sick.

DOLLY: Have you any brandy?

MYRTLE: I'm afraid it's out of hours.

DOLLY: Surely—if someone's feeling ill—

LAURA: I'm all right, really.

(The platform bell goes.)

That's our train.

DOLLY: Just a sip of brandy will buck you up. *(To MYRTLE.)* Please—

MYRTLE: Very well.

(She pours out some brandy.)

DOLLY: How much?

MYRTLE: Tenpence, please.

DOLLY *(paying her)*: There! *(She takes the brandy over to LAURA, who has sat down again at the table.)* Here you are, dear.

LAURA *(taking it)*: Thank you.

As she sips it, the train is heard coming into the station. DOLLY proceeds to gather up her parcels as

the CURTAIN falls.



Pinckney Benedict, a West Virginia native, has published two collections of short fiction and a novel. His stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *Ontario Review*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, *New Stories from the South*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. He is a professor of English at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois.

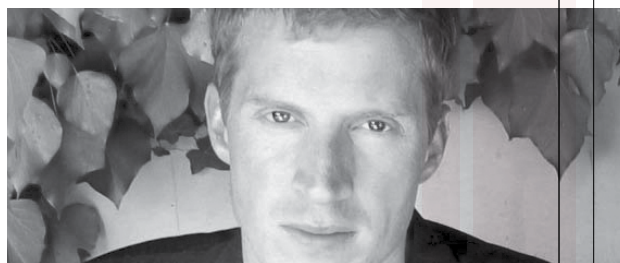
Noel Coward was a celebrated English actor, playwright, and composer. He died in 1973.

Andrew Sean Greer is the author of three books, including most recently the bestselling *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, and the recipient of the California Book Award, the Northern California Book Award, and the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award for writers under thirty-five. He is a judge for the 2007 National Book Award, and his next novel will be published in 2008 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

David Means is the author of three story collections. His second, *Assorted Fire Events*, won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction and was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. His latest collection, *The Secret Goldfish*, was short-listed for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. His stories have appeared recently in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Mystery Stories*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*.

Marilyn Minter was born in 1948 in Shreveport, Louisiana, and has been living and working in New York City since 1976. Her recent shows include solo exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Salon 94, New York City; Gavlak Projects, Palm Beach; and Baldwin Gallery, Aspen; and her paintings and photographs were featured prominently in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. A new catalog of her work was published by Gregory R. Miller & Co. in May 2007.

Yoko Ogawa was born in the prefecture of Okayama, Japan, in 1962. The author of more than twenty novels, novellas, and short story collections, she has won every major award for Japanese literature, including the 1991 Akutagawa Prize for her novella *Ninshin Karenda* (Pregnancy Diary). *Diving Pool*, a collection of three novellas, will be published by Picador in 2008.



Monique Truong



Genevieve Patterson



Evan Kofka



Toyura Masaki

CREDITS

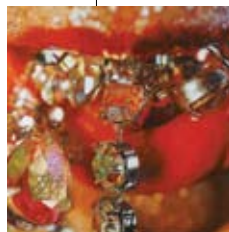
- 1)
Centipede, 2005
Enamel on metal
48 x 48 inches
Private collection, New York, NY
Courtesy of Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
- 2)
Bullet, 2004
Enamel on metal
72 x 48 inches
Collection of Richard Edwards, Aspen, CO
Courtesy of Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, CO
- 3)
Chevy, 2005
Enamel on metal
40 x 40 inches
Collection of Tom Peters
Courtesy of Gavlak, West Palm Beach, FL
- 4)
Strut, 2005
Enamel on metal
96 x 60 inches
Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA
- 5)
Treasure Trail, 2003
Enamel on metal
72 x 48 inches
Collection of Gregory R. Miller, New York, NY
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 6)
Quails Egg, 2004
Enamel on metal
84 x 48 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. David Coe, Sydney, AUS
Courtesy of Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, CO
- 7)
Crystal Swallow, 2006
Enamel on metal
96 x 60 inches
Collection of Jeanne and Michael Klein, Austin, TX
Fractional and promised gift to the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin
- 8)
Jawbreaker, 2004
Enamel on metal
48 x 84 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Linden Nelson, Bloomfield Hills, MI
Courtesy of Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, CO
- 9)
Freckles, 2007
Enamel on metal
60 x 86 inches
Courtesy of Andréhn-Schiptjenko Gallery, Stockholm, SWE
- 10)
Sparkle Freckle, 2007
Enamel on metal
24 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 11)
Clown, 2002
Enamel on metal
40 x 40 inches
Private collection, New York, NY
Courtesy of Fredericks & Freiser, New York, NY
- 12)
Rock Candy, 2005
Enamel on metal
72 x 48 inches
Private collection, JPN
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 13)
Caravaggio Lily, 2007
Enamel on metal
53 x 35 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 14)
Lilyputti, 2006
Enamel on metal
24 x 24 inches
Private collection
Courtesy of the Stephanie and Peter Brant Foundation
- 15)
Goldi, 2005
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 16)
Swarv, 2005
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 17)
Heel, 2007
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 18)
Glisten, 2002
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 19)
Runs, 2005
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 20)
Drool, 2003
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 21)
Satiated, 2003
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 22)
Speckled, 2006
C-Print
86 x 60 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 23)
Split, 2003
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 24)
Pierce, 2006
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 25)
Slick, 2000
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 26)
Armpit, 2006
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 27)
Drop, 2007
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 28)
Climber, 2005
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 29)
Cats Eye, 2006
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 30)
Pink Bra, 2007
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 31)
Double Bubble, 2007
C-Print
50 x 36 inches
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY
- 32)
Untitled, 2007
C-Print
Courtesy of Salon 94, New York, NY



1



2



3



4



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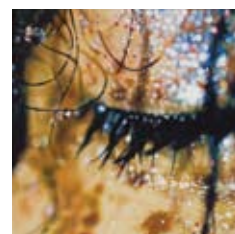
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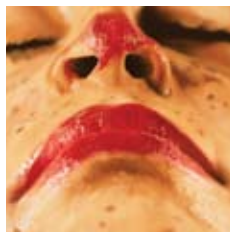
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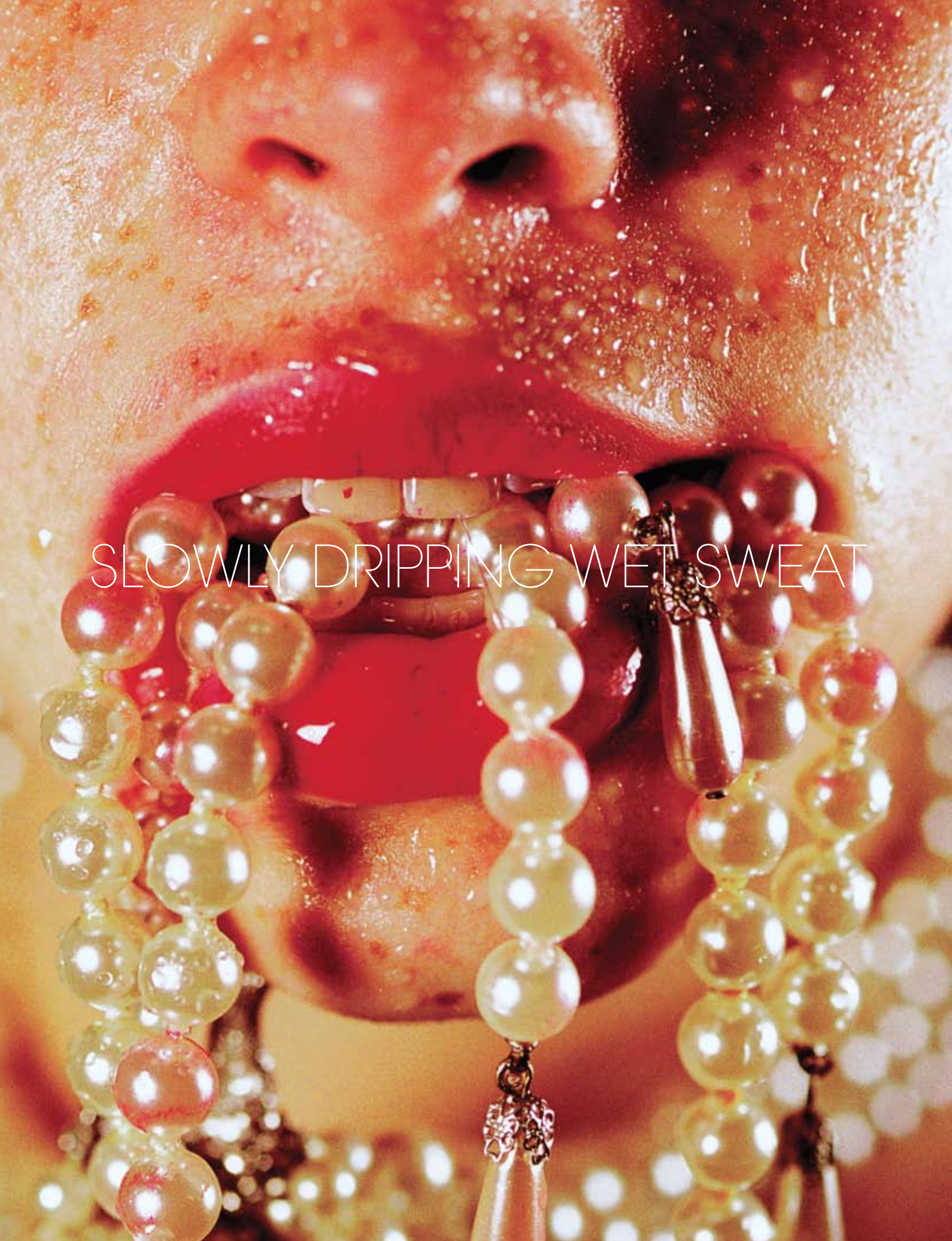
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SLOWLY DRIPPING WET SWEAT